

Eat Right to Ease PMS

Though you may be craving chocolate, reach for veggies instead to quell PMS symptoms.

By Linda Knittel

When it comes to soothing premenstrual symptoms (PMS), the best medicine may be found in your kitchen. Studies have shown that a number of foods can actually eliminate the mood swings, bloating, blemishes, breast tenderness, and fatigue that often precede menstruation. "The majority of PMS symptoms are the result of an imbalance in hormones, such that there is too much estrogen in the body when compared to the amount of progesterone," says Beth Burch, N.D., of Emerita for Health Women's Institute in Portland, Oregon.

To combat this disparity, many experts believe that women should consume more foods that help balance hormones, such as soy, vegetables and fruit, and nuts and seeds. According to a study appearing in *Obstetrics and Gynecology* (February 2000), a low-fat, vegetarian diet that included legumes and whole grains increased the sex hormone-binding globulin in the blood, which keeps hormones in check and therefore many PMS symptoms at bay. Also, the fiber found in many vegetables and fruits helps to flush excess hormones from the body. Complex carbohydrates like whole grains can also boost serotonin levels in the brain, which helps to keep mood elevated even during those difficult days prior to one's period.

For many women excess estrogen also causes breast tenderness and bloating the week before menstruation. In those instances the isoflavones found in soy-based foods such as tofu bind to estrogen receptors and block the body's own estrogen from causing such symptoms.

Numerous clinical trials have also shown that both magnesium and calcium play crucial roles in the prevention of PMS symptoms. For example, consuming 200 mg of magnesium daily (which is slightly more than a cup of cooked spinach) was found to reduce the bloating, weight gain, and breast tenderness (*Journal of Women's Health*, November 1998). Other magnesium-rich foods include peanut butter, lima beans, kale, and nuts. Another study in the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* (December 1999) showed a daily dose of 1,200 mg of calcium (found in spinach, broccoli, and soymilk) cut food cravings and mood swings, most likely because calcium enhances the brain's processing of serotonin.

Burch adds that avoiding certain foods is also important. For instance, refined carbohydrates and sugar-filled foods, such as breads and desserts, disrupt blood-sugar levels causing fatigue and mood swings. Also, sodium contributes to bloating and breast tenderness, while non-organic dairy products and meats contain hormones that can cause inflammation and thus worsen cramps and bloating.