

Treatment for heavy periods

The intrauterine system



What are heavy periods?

A menstrual period occurs when you shed the lining of your womb, and usually lasts for about five days every four weeks or so. Menorrhagia (heavy periods) are those when your menstrual blood flow is heavy and/or prolonged. The volume of blood loss that is unacceptable to some women is normal for others, so precise measurements are difficult to make.

What are the symptoms?

When you have your period you may pass blood clots, or flood with heavy loss which soaks your underwear or bedding at night. Continual heavy blood loss may lead to anaemia, making you feel tired and lethargic.

Are heavy periods common?

Yes, one in five women will see their doctor about heavy periods. They tend to occur more commonly in women approaching the menopause, between the ages of 40 and 50 years.

What causes heavy periods?

A number of different medical conditions that affect your womb may cause heavy periods. However, usually there is no apparent medical reason; this is sometimes called dysfunctional bleeding. If you have dysfunctional bleeding, you may benefit from treatment with an intrauterine system (IUS) to reduce bleeding.

What is an IUS?

An IUS is a small plastic T-shaped device with a small reservoir around the stem. This reservoir

contains the hormone levonorgestrel (a form of progestogen), which is also used in some contraceptive pills.

The IUS is fitted into your womb where it releases the hormone slowly and steadily over a period of six to eight years.



The IUS was developed as a contraceptive, but it is also very effective at reducing menstrual bleeding. For this reason, it can be used as a treatment for heavy periods and helps many women avoid a hysterectomy (surgery to remove the womb). The IUS currently available in the UK is called Mirena or Levosert.

How does it work?

The hormone in the IUS makes the lining of the womb very thin. This means there is very little to come away at period time.

How long will it last?

The IUS will usually last for six to eight years after which it can be replaced with a new device.

How does it affect menstrual blood flow?

- The IUS can reduce the amount of bleeding and the length of your periods.
- There may be an initial increase in spotting and bleeding but this rapidly decreases. After around six months the days of bleeding per month are reduced by about 50%.
- Your periods may stop altogether. This is more likely to happen as you approach the menopause and is nothing to worry about.
- After five years some 35% of women will be period free and 56% will only have occasional bleeding.
- Around two out of three women will avoid surgery such as a hysterectomy.

Are there any other benefits?

- Period pain is often reduced.
- The IUS may help reduce symptoms of PMT (pre-menstrual tension).
- The IUS may also shrink some fibroids in the lining of the womb.
- It provides reliable contraception.
- The IUS can be used as part of HRT.

How effective is the IUS as a contraceptive?

- The failure rate is 1 in 500 per year for women of all ages. This is as effective as a female sterilisation operation.
- The IUS thickens the mucus at the neck of your womb so that it is difficult for sperm to get through to reach the egg.

- It may stop ovulation (the release of an egg from your ovaries), but most pre-menopausal women will continue to ovulate.
- If the IUS is fitted during the first seven days of your period, the contraceptive effect is immediate. If it is fitted at any other time, you will need to use an alternative contraceptive for the first seven days after insertion.

What happens when the IUS is removed?

Your fertility and periods will return to their previous pattern (unless you have become menopausal).

Can the IUS be used for HRT?

Not all of the IUS are licensed for HRT use in this country, but your doctor may suggest that it could be used in this way in certain circumstances. It lasts for five years.

Most of the benefits of HRT come from oestrogen, which helps to relieve menopausal symptoms such as hot flushes and tiredness. Oestrogen makes the lining of the womb thicker, so a progestogen is needed to stop this. The IUS is very effective at providing this progestogen. Bleeding is uncommon after one year and the oestrogen can be taken by any method as preferred.

What are the side effects?

- You will usually have irregular bleeding, spotting and prolonged lighter periods during the first six months. This settles in most women by a year.

- Red or brown spotting may occur but this is normal and nothing to worry about.
- You may experience breast tenderness, which will resolve in time. Evening primrose oil may help to relieve this, or you may need additional short-term treatment.
- Other side effects may include headache, acne, greasy skin or mood changes. These are common to all progestogen treatments but are much less likely to occur with the IUS because the concentration of hormone in the blood is far less than with tablets or injections. These symptoms usually stop as the irregular bleeding settles.

Remember...

Unlike a conventional contraceptive coil, an IUS results in lighter and often less painful periods. Very little hormone gets into the bloodstream, so side-effects are rare and less marked than with alternatives such as the minipill.

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