

Oxygen Women

ROBERT KENNEDY
WOMEN'S FITNESS

October 2009

RI IDN

OKY Health

Stay Strong

During Your Period

How to stay fit and sane during your week from hell.

BY SARAH TUFF

Back when Andi Martin was a teenager, she dreaded that one week a month when premenstrual syndrome (PMS) put a halt to her normal exercise routine – the cramps, bloating and irritability made working the television remote from the couch way more appealing than working out. “But my basketball coach always told us that physical activity was a great way to make PMS symptoms subside,” remembers Martin.

Today, Martin still experiences the classic hormonal symptoms, including mood swings and water weight gain. But the Pittsburgh-based certified strength and conditioning coach has also learned to power through her period. “As a mom, wife, business owner and overall multitasker, I don’t think much about PMS being an obstacle to my well-being and fitness,” says Martin, 37. “Exercise is something I have to do as part of my life, and I can’t let these crazy symptoms get in the way!”

You may have felt similar symptoms, or heard stories about how your menstrual cycle can affect your performance. Studies by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), however, show no effect – good or bad – of your body’s natural rhythms on your ability to do cardio or strength

training. Still, doctors, trainers and fellow fit gals recognize that these rhythms impact your regular gym regimens. Here, they share tips on how to stay fit during the week from hell.

Stay on Track Unless you have excessive pain or blood loss during your period, says Sabrena Merrill, MS, a fitness consultant and American Council on Exercise spokesperson, one of the best ways to manage the ups and downs of your menstrual cycle is by going to the gym. “The simple act of aerobic exercise, as long as it doesn’t exacerbate cramping, will help with the serotonin production to help alleviate the mood,” she says. “Then the endorphins, the body’s natural pain killers, kick in.”

It’s a formula that gets Martin through every time. When she feels a menstrual mood swing, she heads straight for the stationary bike. “I love spinning because of the mind-body connection involved, and I’m truly able to release all of my stress on the bike,” she says. “I leave the room drenched and feeling like a million bucks.”

And sticking with your strength training routine through PMS and your period is not only OK; it may actually help reduce monthly discomfort as well. A recent study published in *Gynecological Endocrinology* found that women “significantly reduced” severe uterine pain, irritability and other PMS symptoms by undertaking a 12-week physical fitness course that included strength training.

MAXIMIZING MOTIVATION

1. Plan your workout weeks ahead of time, suggests *Oxygen* cover girl and trainer Lindsay Messina. Writing down your workout to-do list with little check-off boxes next to them will make you more likely to complete the tasks.



2. Steal from him. That hot little outfit may not seem appealing during your period, so work out in whatever clothes are comfortable, even if it’s your husband’s gym T-shirt.

3. Buddy up. A workout partner may not only help get your behind to the gym, but she may also be a sounding board for a bitch session during this irritable time.

"Exercise can help balance hormones, stimulate endorphin release, improve circulation and relieve stress," says sports medicine expert Erin Boynton, MD, "which can combat symptoms of PMS and menstruation."

Tweak Your Training

While Boynton advises that there are no specific strength-training moves that should be avoided during your time of the month, women should simply reduce the load if they're feeling zapped. If you normally do biceps curls with 20-pound dumbbells, give yourself a break and switch to the 15-pound ones while having your period; and be sure to do more reps.

Feeling more tired? "If you're particularly fatigued, then lighten the intensity of your workout to gain the benefits of exercise without risking injury or overtraining," says Boynton.

You can also try taking it easier on your body. "The week of my PMS I tend to do smaller muscle groups that are less exhausting—butt, shoulders, biceps and triceps," says *Oxygen* cover girl and New York trainer Lindsay Messina. "I switch my workouts all the time so for me to take it down a level or two doesn't hurt; I just hit it hard the next week."

TO REDUCE
MENSTRUAL
SYMPTOMS,
STICK TO YOUR
TRAINING
ROUTINE.

The Science Behind Your Cycle



"The menstrual cycle is regulated by a complex interaction of hormones," says Jessica Matthews, a San Diego-based personal trainer and spokesperson for the American Council on Exercise.

Some sports medicine doctors have reported that your menstrual cycle can impact your power. But in 2007, an ACSM study found a "lack of influence of a regular menstrual cycle on performance" among women tested on an ergometer. Another ACSM study found no effect of hormonal shifts on women's strength or power during cycling and jumping.

But it is hard to train during your period, the authors concluded, pointing to the swelling, discomfort and irritability that can impair performance. "Individual experiences with premenstrual or menstrual symptoms might exert a negative influence for some individuals," says Barbara Bushman, Ph.D., of Missouri State University. So always listen to your body.

For more ways to outsmart your period, log on to oxygenmag.com/period



Balance Your Diet

Your macronutrient intake should not change during your menstrual cycle. Stick to these guidelines from the USDA, all month long.

1. **Carbohydrates:** 45 to 65 percent of total daily caloric intake.
2. **Fats:** 20 to 35 percent of total daily caloric intake.
3. **Proteins:** 12 to 35 percent of total daily caloric intake.



Perimenopause

Perimenopause, when estrogen levels rise and fall unevenly and your cycles start becoming irregular, says the Mayo Clinic, can start as early as your mid-30s. And a 2007 study in *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica*, the official journal of the Nordic Federation of Societies of Obstetrics and Gynecology, showed that perimenopause's estrogen losses can also cause a

loss of balance. So if you're in your 30s, now's the time to start practicing yoga, Pilates or other balancing activities to help keep falls at bay.



But if you're having painful cramps, says Merrill, avoid pelvic and abdominal exercises that compress the midsection, which can worsen the pain in your uterus. Instead, try yoga moves such as child's pose or the cat/cow that will stretch your spine, increase blood flow to reduce pain and relieve pressure from your lower back. Standing abs exercises can help tighten and tone the core without the compression effect.

Jessica Matthews, a San Diego-based personal trainer and spokesperson for the American Council on Exercise, also points out that because there's a slight increase in core body temperature during the second part of menstruation, you might want to avoid exercising in a hot environment.

As an active woman, take comfort in the fact that by working out consistently, you'll probably also be better equipped to deal with your cycles in the future. "It seems the fitter you are, the fewer PMS symptoms you have," says Margot Putukian, MD, FACSM, the director of athletic medicine and head team physician for Princeton University. "We're not sure why this is true, but it's a good reason to keep working out."

Eating Clean If you're feeling bloated, Boynton recommends modifying your meal timing during

your period. If you normally eat an hour before a workout, switch that to 90 minutes to allow more time for food to pass through your GI tract and thus avoid worsening cramps while you are working out.

And even though you're retaining water during your period, this is no time to skimp on hydration. "I drink as much water as possible to help reduce all the bloating," says Kentucky-based fitness expert Brooke Griffin.

"Excess salt, such as in fast food, potato chips and canned soups, can exacerbate fluid retention symptoms," says Matthews, who adds that caffeine can worsen PMS symptoms, as can alcohol and refined sugar.

Instead, up your intake of fruits and veggies, says Merrill, since your GI tract runs next to your uterus, material in there can make cramps worse, and fibrous foods will help clear the way to a more pain-free day by stimulating movement through the GI tract and out of the body.

The bottom line? Staying strong and fit means sticking to your healthy habits. "I always say that women want PMS to stand for 'Please Move Slowly,'" says Massachusetts-based fitness coach Cathy Savage. "But in reality, we should all do the opposite. It can be a tough, emotional time, but the important thing is to stay consistent." ☉

EAT RIGHT

Stay on track during your period by adding these clean foods to your meals.

SPLIT PEAS:

High-fiber content helps speed up passage of food in the GI tract and reduce cramps.

ORANGES:

Vitamin C aids in the absorption of iron; also high in fiber.

TOFU: Phytoestrogens may reduce PMS symptoms; protein sustains energy levels.

YOGURT: Calcium may help regulate mood.

SPINACH:

Helps replace iron lost during the menstrual cycle.