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5 things you should know before you treat PMDD with lifestyle change

Introduction to PMDD

Premenstrual dysmorphic disorder (PMDD) is a very severe form of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) that has psychological symptoms including mood disturbances, low mood, intense anger, and anxiety. PMDD affects around 1 in 20 people with menstrual cycles and is different from the more common PMS due to severe interference with work, social activities, relationships, and mental health and wellbeing. PMDD is relatively unknown and is thought to be "just something that happens before your period", and because of this there is lack of treatment, diagnosis, and awareness from both medical professions and the public.

Due to the severity of symptoms there is a desire for additional treatments aside from the usual treatment of hormonal contraceptives or SSRIs. Some people may choose not to opt for medications, or some people may require additional treatments as medication only manages their symptoms so far. Therefore there are numerous lifestyle changes that are often recommended.

In this Happiful Hack we will review management of PMDD with nutrition, weight loss, exercise, caffeine, and supplements, which are all the most common complementary strategies.

Can food be your PMDD medicine?

If you suffer from PMDD you may have searched online for "best foods for PMDD" and been delivered lists upon lists of foods to eat, and foods to avoid.

As a nutritionist, I am here to let you know that no one food or nutrient can cure or prevent PMDD symptoms. There are however some patterns of eating that might be supportive in those who are also taking medication for treatment, as an additional strategy. Here are some nutrition recommendations that may hold merit for management of PMDD:

- Include wholegrains: Whole grains contain B vitamins and fibre which are linked to improved mental health (1), and fibre can help reduce estrogen dominance which is often found in people with PMDD.
- Eat calcium rich foods: Including 2-3 portions of dairy or fortified dairy alternatives everyday may help reduce headaches, low moods, and feelings of paranoia.

Should you lose weight to manage PMDD?

There is no evidence that PMDD is caused by or exacerbated by a person being in a larger body. Weight loss recommendations are extremely common in healthcare, however evidence shows that around 90-95% of people regain the weight they lose in 2-5 years (2).

Instead of dieting, chose to take care of yourself with real health practices including:

- Not skipping meals and eating every 3-4 hours.
- Including foods you enjoy in your diet.
- Learn to accept your body and know that weight is not equal to health.

Managing with movement

One complimentary treatment for PMDD is exercise, specifically moving for 30 minutes per day. This may be effective for some, however there are some things to note before going on a fitness regime to manage symptoms:

- Rest and gentle movement like walking or yoga may be more beneficial than high intensity exercise.
- Making sure to fuel before and after exercise is essential to reducing fatigue, prolonged muscle soreness, and injuries.

Should you quit the lattes?

There is no evidence to suggest avoiding caffeine will reduce PMDD symptoms, however high intake of caffeine (more than 400mg) per day can increase sleep disturbances, which people with PMDD are very prone to. You don't need to cut out caffeine, instead try these three tips:

- When PMDD symptoms are highest at around 10 days before your period, try to consume caffeinated drinks before midday.
- Opt for decaffeinated options, such as decaf coffee and tea, or herbal teas like chamomile and peppermint.

What about supplements?

The three most common supplements that are often recommended are calcium carbonate, vitamin B6, and Angus Castus. These supplements are not recommended as treatment by your GP as there is not enough evidence that they can specifically treat PMDD.

Here are some key things to know:

- Supplements do not work in your body the same way food does. There is a term called the "whole food matrix" which is how different nutrients in foods react with one another, so it is not as simple as "this nutrient will reduce this symptom" which is why a food supplement may not prove beneficial.
- The evidence for supplements to manage PMDD is anecdotal, which means it may be other factors that are reducing symptoms. Before forking out money on supplements, try out some of the other suggestions in this Happiful Hack.

References

1. Khosravi M, Sotoudeh G, Amini M, Raisi F, Mansoori A, Hosseinzadeh M., the relationship between dietary patterns and depression mediated by serum levels of folate and vitamin B12. BMC Psychiatry. Feb 2020; 20(63).
2. Anderson JW, Konz, EC, Fredrich, RC, Wood CL., Long-term weight-loss maintenance: a meta-analysis of US studies. Am J Clin Nutr. Nov 2001; 74(5): 579-84.