

What You Should Know About Endometriosis

Endometriosis is a common condition in women. It occurs when tissue that normally lines the inside of the uterus grows on the outside of it, mainly in the abdomen. Monthly hormonal changes produce inflammation and pain in this tissue.

What are the symptoms of endometriosis?

Pelvic pain is the most common symptom of endometriosis. The pain can be present before or after menstrual periods, as well as during or after intercourse. Other symptoms may include lower back or intestinal pain, cramps, heavy bleeding with periods, spotting between periods, fatigue, and pain with bowel movements or urination. Some women do not have symptoms from endometriosis but become aware of it when they have trouble getting pregnant.

What causes endometriosis?

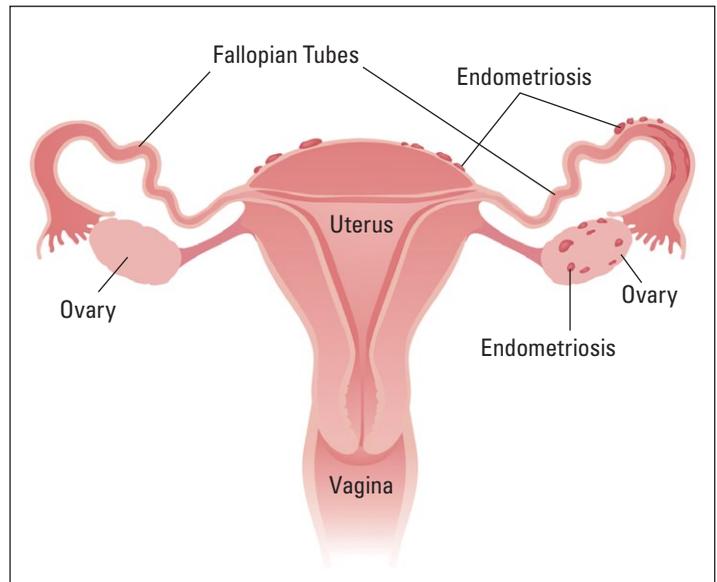
The cause of endometriosis is not known; it may be genetic or influenced by hormones. It may be caused by “retrograde menstrual flow,” in which some of the tissue shed during the period flows into the pelvis. Endometriosis is not a sexually transmitted disease, and it is not caused by an infection.

How do I know if I have endometriosis?

The only definite way to diagnosis endometriosis is by having laparoscopy. This is a minor operation in which a surgeon looks inside the abdominal cavity with a special camera. However, most clinicians who suspect endometriosis will start treatment based on your symptoms.

What treatments are available?

There is no cure for endometriosis, but the symptoms often can be controlled. Medications such as ibuprofen or naproxen may reduce the inflammation and pain. Birth control pills, patches, or rings may shrink endometrial tissue and give relief from the pain. Your health care professional may also prescribe leuprolide acetate plus another drug that provides “add-back” therapy to prevent side effects. In some cases, surgery may be necessary.



Gorman Medical Illustration

What if I want to become pregnant?

Having endometriosis may make it difficult to become pregnant. In this case, treatment decisions may become more complex, depending on your symptoms, age, and other health factors. If your endometriosis is not severe, having intercourse during the most fertile days of your menstrual cycle may be all you need to try. Endometriosis-related infertility is often successfully treated with hormones and laparoscopy. Other advanced fertility treatments, such as in vitro fertilization, may improve chances of pregnancy.

How does pregnancy affect endometriosis?

Many women experience relief from their pain during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Some have worsening of symptoms, especially during the first 3 months. In most cases, endometriosis will return after giving birth.

How do I cope?

Symptoms of endometriosis can be difficult at times and certainly can cause distress. If you have endometriosis, find out more information about the condition and speak to your clinician about options for treatment and resources for support.