

## Fibroids

Fibroids, or myomas, are growths or benign tumours that form inside the uterus (womb). Around four in 10 women over the age of 40 will have fibroids. It is not known why fibroids develop, but it's thought that the sex hormones, oestrogen and progesterone, play key roles. This is because fibroids rarely grow in girls before puberty and women after menopause. Pre-existing fibroids stop growing and can even shrink in women after menopause.

Often, fibroids don't cause any problems, but are occasionally associated with infertility, miscarriage and premature labour. Other problems can include heavy, long and painful periods. Treatment depends on the size, number and location of the fibroids, but can include drugs, procedures done under local anaesthetic and surgery. Fibroids rarely become cancerous.

### Symptoms

Most women with fibroids don't have symptoms. When symptoms are present, they can include:

- Heavy, long and painful periods
- Spotting between periods
- Pain during sex
- Feeling of heaviness or pressure in the back, bowel and bladder
- Urinating often
- A lump or swelling in the lower abdomen.

### Different types

Fibroids are categorised by their location, which includes:

- **Intramural** – the most common type, growing in the wall of the uterus.
- **Submucosal** – growing in the lining of the uterus (endometrium). This type can cause heavy, long and painful periods.
- **Subserosal** – growing on the outside of the wall of the uterus, sometimes appearing like long stalks.

### Common complications

Fibroids can cause a range of complications, including:

- **Anaemia** – excessive menstrual blood loss can cause anaemia, where the body isn't able to carry enough oxygen in the blood. Symptoms of anaemia include breathlessness, fatigue and paleness.
- **Problems urinating** – large fibroids can make the uterus bulge, pressing against the bladder. This can cause a feeling of fullness or discomfort and the need to urinate often.
- **Infertility** – fibroids can interfere with implantation of the fertilised egg in a number of ways. For example, the egg might try to implant into a fibroid, or fibroids might change the shape of the uterus and make it difficult for an egg to implant.
- **Miscarriage and premature delivery** – fibroids can reduce blood flow to the placenta or compete for space with the developing baby.

### Diagnosis

Fibroids can be detected using an ultrasound, where sound waves create a two-dimensional picture. The inside of the uterus can be seen with a hysteroscope, which is a thin tube passed through the cervix (entrance to the womb). A small camera might be placed at the tip of the hysteroscope to see the inside of the uterus on a monitor.

## Treatment

- Treatment depends on the size, number and location of the fibroids, but can include:
- **Monitoring** – if the fibroids aren't causing any symptoms and aren't large, the condition can be watched closely over time for any changes.
- **Drugs** – A combination of hormones or other drugs can be used to shrink the fibroids before surgery.
- **Arterial embolisation** – under local anaesthetic, a fine tube is passed through an artery in the arm or leg into the main artery supplying the fibroid with blood. The process is monitored by x-ray. Fine, sand-like particles are then injected into the artery to block the blood supply to the fibroid. The fibroid slowly dies and symptoms generally settle over a few months.
- **Hysteroscopy** – the fibroids are removed through the cervix using a hysteroscope.
- **Laparoscopy** – or 'keyhole surgery', is where a thin tube is inserted through the abdomen to remove the fibroids.
- **Open surgery** – larger fibroids need to be removed through a cut in the abdomen. This procedure weakens the wall of the uterus and makes Caesarean sections for future pregnancies more likely.
- **Hysterectomy** – is the surgical removal of some, or all, of the uterus. Pregnancy isn't possible after a hysterectomy.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Gynaecologist

## Things to remember

- Fibroids, or myomas, are growths or benign tumours that form inside the uterus.
- Around 30 to 40 per cent of women over the age of 40 have fibroids.
- Symptoms can include heavy and painful periods, infertility and miscarriage in pregnancy.
- Treatment options include the use of drugs to shrink the fibroids, embolisation or surgical removal.

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