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Ectopic pregnancy

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Summary

- Ectopic pregnancy is a pregnancy that develops outside the uterus, usually in one of the fallopian tubes.
- Symptoms can include cramping, abdominal pain and vaginal bleeding.
- A ruptured fallopian tube is a medical emergency needing immediate treatment.

During ovulation, an egg (ovum) is released from one of the ovaries. Conception occurs when the egg meets a sperm in the fallopian tube. Normally, the fertilised egg moves down the fallopian tube and into the uterus (womb) to implant in the uterine lining (endometrium).

Ectopic pregnancy is a pregnancy that develops outside the uterus, usually in one of the fallopian tubes. In almost all cases, the embryo dies. The developing placenta cannot access a rich blood supply and the fallopian tube is not large enough to support the growing embryo.

In around 15 per cent of cases, the tube ruptures, causing pain, internal bleeding and shock. **This is a medical emergency needing immediate surgery and, in some cases, a blood transfusion.** In an emergency, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance or go immediately to the nearest hospital emergency department.

An ectopic pregnancy can also develop in the cervix (entrance to the womb), the abdominal cavity and the ovary itself, but these cases are rare. Around five in 1,000 pregnancies are ectopic.

Symptoms of ectopic pregnancy

The symptoms of ectopic pregnancy can mimic miscarriage or the symptoms of other reproductive disorders, such as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) or endometriosis. An ectopic pregnancy can first appear as a normal pregnancy.

The symptoms of ectopic pregnancy can include:

- the usual signs of pregnancy, such as amenorrhoea (missed period), morning sickness and breast tenderness
- pain in the lower abdomen
- pain in the lower back
- cramps on one side of the pelvis
- vaginal bleeding or spotting
- sudden and severe pain in the lower abdomen (if the fallopian tube ruptures).

Risk factors for ectopic pregnancy

Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube. This can be caused by a blockage in the tube or because the tiny hairs inside the tube are not able to sweep the fertilised egg towards the uterus.

Factors that can increase a woman's risk of having an ectopic pregnancy include:

- successful reversal of a tubal sterilisation
- endometriosis
- past infection with PID or salpingitis (inflammation of the fallopian tubes) and associated scarring
- defects of the fallopian tube
- use of assisted reproductive technologies
- past ectopic pregnancy
- damage to the fallopian tube caused by a ruptured appendix.

Contraception and ectopic pregnancy

The contraceptives currently available in Australia do not increase the risk of ectopic pregnancy. However, of pregnancies that occur while using contraception, a percentage are ectopic. These include around:

- five per cent in women using copper IUDs or progestogen-only pills (mini pills)
- ten per cent in women using the contraceptive implant
- up to 50 per cent in women using hormone releasing IUDs.

If a pregnancy occurs as a result of a failed tubal sterilisation, there is also a higher risk that it will be ectopic, but the percentage is unknown.

Because implants and IUDs are extremely effective methods of contraception and pregnancy is highly unlikely, these methods can be used in women with a past history of ectopic pregnancy. The progestogen-only pill can also be considered. Women who use these forms of contraception need to be aware of the symptoms of ectopic pregnancy.

Diagnosis of ectopic pregnancy

Around 15 per cent of cases of ectopic pregnancy are diagnosed in the emergency room after the fallopian tube has ruptured. In most cases, ectopic pregnancy can be diagnosed using a range of tests, some of which are standard medical procedures for all pregnant women, including:

- pelvic examination
- blood tests
- ultrasound
- laparoscopy ('keyhole' surgery).

Treatment for ectopic pregnancy

A ruptured fallopian tube is a medical emergency. Laparoscopic surgery is done to remove the embryo and attempts are made to repair the fallopian tube. A blood transfusion may also be needed.

For non-emergency ectopic pregnancy, medication is often successful, but sometimes surgery is still needed. Any woman thought to have or found to have an ectopic pregnancy will need careful observation. Most women who have had an ectopic pregnancy can become pregnant again, but they will need careful follow up, as their risk of ectopic pregnancy is higher.

Early screening for ectopic pregnancy is vital

Screening and developments in early pregnancy monitoring have considerably reduced the number of deaths from ectopic pregnancy. Women who are at high risk must be monitored closely during early pregnancy through blood tests and ultrasound.

It is important to tell your doctor if your medical history includes any of the known risk factors. You should also see your doctor immediately if you have unusual pregnancy symptoms such as cramping, pain or vaginal bleeding.

Risk reduction for ectopic pregnancy

Many cases of ectopic pregnancy are caused by scarring of the fallopian tubes. Suggestions on how to reduce your risk of fallopian tube damage include:

- treating any pelvic infection promptly
- treating any sexually transmissible infection (STI) promptly
- avoiding STIs by always using a condom when having sex if the risk of an STI is at all possible.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance or go immediately to your nearest hospital emergency department
- Your doctor
- Obstetrician

Things to remember

- Ectopic pregnancy is a pregnancy that develops outside the uterus, usually in one of the fallopian tubes.
- Symptoms can include cramping, abdominal pain and vaginal bleeding.
- A ruptured fallopian tube is a medical emergency needing immediate treatment.

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[Sometimes, babies arrive early. It's important to recognise premature labour, in case you and your baby need medical care...](#)

- [Contraception after giving birth](#)

[After having a baby, you need to choose an effective method of contraception if you don't want to have another baby straight away...](#)

- [If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything](#)

[If you are trying for a baby, to increase your chances of conceiving, it helps to know when you are at your most fertile, and when is the best time to have sex...](#)

- [Pregnancy testing](#)

[Sometimes, a home pregnancy test may be positive when a woman isn't pregnant...](#)

- [Folate for pregnant women](#)

[Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy...](#)

- [Pregnancy - unplanned](#)

[When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption...](#)

- [Contraception - emergency contraception](#)

[It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours \(four days\)...](#)

Stages of pregnancy

- [Baby due date](#)

[Pregnancy is calculated from the first day of your last period, not from the date of conception...](#)

- [Pregnancy - signs and symptoms](#)

[All women experience pregnancy differently, and you will experience different symptoms at different stages of your pregnancy...](#)

- [Planning for labour and birth](#)

[Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions...](#)

- [Conceiving a baby](#)

[The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation \(the release of the egg from the ovary\) are approximately one in five every month. Around nine...](#)

- [Pregnancy stages and changes](#)

[It's helpful to have an idea of how your body may react to the different stages of pregnancy. It also helps to know how pregnancy may affect your emotions and feelings...](#)

Fertility issues and options

- [Adoption](#)

[Adoption can give a secure family life to children who can't live with their birth family...](#)

- [Surrogacy](#)

[Surrogacy is a form of assisted reproductive treatment \(ART\) in which a woman carries a child within her uterus on behalf of another person or couple...](#)

- [If you want to get pregnant, timing is everything](#)

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- [Abortion](#)

[All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions...](#)

- [Age and fertility](#)

[Age affects the fertility of both men and women, and is the single biggest factor affecting a woman's chance to conceive and have a healthy baby...](#)

- [Infertility in men](#)

[A couple isn't suspected of fertility problems until they have tried and failed to conceive for one year...](#)

- [Infertility in women](#)

[The odds of a young fertile couple conceiving by having sexual intercourse around the time of ovulation are approximately one in five every month...](#)

- [Weight, fertility and pregnancy health](#)

[Compared with women in the healthy weight range, women who are carrying extra weight are less likely to conceive...](#)

Keeping healthy during pregnancy

- [Pregnancy - morning sickness](#)

[Morning sickness is typically at its worst early in the day but it can strike at any point during the day or night...](#)

- [Postnatal exercise - sample workout](#)

[Make sure your abdominal muscles have healed before you do any vigorous tummy exercises, such as crunches...](#)

- [Healthy eating during pregnancy - tucker talk tips](#)

[Some foods should be avoided during pregnancy as they carry bacteria that could harm your unborn baby...](#)

- [Postnatal exercise](#)

[Always consult with your doctor or midwife before starting any postnatal exercise program...](#)

- [Pregnancy and your mental health](#)

[Finding out you are pregnant can be a very exciting time. But it can also make you feel uncomfortable, unwell, worried and make you wonder how you are going to cope. And it doesn't stop when the baby...](#)

- [Pregnancy and teeth](#)

[It's important to look after your teeth and gums when you're pregnant, as gum disease can affect your baby...](#)

- [Tests, scans and checks - pregnancy and labour](#)

[Tests can confirm your pregnancy and also monitor your baby's development in the womb...](#)

- [Alcohol and pregnancy](#)

[There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...](#)

- [Pregnancy and smoking](#)

[Smoking while pregnant exposes a woman and her unborn child to an increased risk of health problems...](#)

- [Immunisation and pregnancy](#)

[Immunisation can protect a woman and her unborn baby against many infectious diseases...](#)

- [Folate for pregnant women](#)

[Even women who aren't planning to have a baby should increase their folate intake in case of unplanned pregnancy...](#)

- [Pregnancy and exercise](#)

[Unless you have complications, you should be able to exercise throughout your pregnancy...](#)

- [Pelvic floor](#)

[Pelvic floor exercises are designed to improve muscle tone and prevent the need for corrective surgery...](#)

- [Pregnancy and diet](#)

[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)

- [Pregnancy and travel](#)

[Travelling to developing nations is not encouraged during pregnancy, due to the risk of disease and the standard of medical facilities...](#)

Health concerns during pregnancy

- [Miscarriage and Stillbirth - Coming to terms \(video\)](#)

- [Pregnancy - bleeding problems](#)

[Bleeding from the vagina in early pregnancy happens in almost one in four pregnancies...](#)

- [Newborn bloodspot screening \(video\)](#)

[Every newborn baby in Australia is offered a newborn bloodspot screening test to identify those at risk for rare, but serious, medical conditions including PKU.](#)

[hypothyroidism and cystic fibrosis...](#)

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[Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by...](#)

- [Placental abruption](#)

[Placental abruption means the placenta has detached from the wall of the uterus, starving the baby of oxygen and nutrients...](#)

- [Pregnancy - pre-eclampsia](#)

[There is no evidence that pre-eclampsia is caused by emotional stress, working too hard or not getting enough rest...](#)

- [Lupus and pregnancy](#)

[Lupus can be controlled with medications, so the majority of affected women are able to have children...](#)

- [HIV and women – having children](#)

[Women living with human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves \(if...](#)

- [Alcohol and pregnancy](#)

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[Postnatal depression can happen either a few days or weeks after the birth, with a slow or sudden onset...](#)

- [Molar pregnancy](#)

[Most molar pregnancies are diagnosed when bleeding early in pregnancy prompts an ultrasound scan...](#)

- [Miscarriage](#)

[A range of feelings is normal after a miscarriage, and they often linger for some time...](#)

- [Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder \(FASD\)](#)

[The World Health Organization recommends that pregnant women should avoid alcohol...](#)

- [Asthma - pregnancy and breastfeeding](#)

[Pregnant women with asthma need to continue to take their asthma medication as it is important to the health of both mother and baby that the mother's asthma is well managed...](#)

- [Pregnancy and diet](#)

[Good nutrition during pregnancy can help to keep you and your developing baby healthy...](#)

- [Birth defects explained](#)

[The cause of birth defects is often unknown, speak to your GP if you are at increased risk of having a baby with a congenital anomaly...](#)

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[Ectopic pregnancy is caused by a fertilised egg not being able to move through the fallopian tube...](#)

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[It's very important for you and your baby to be looked after from the start of your pregnancy until after the birth of your baby...](#)

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[Sometimes, babies arrive early. It's important to recognise premature labour, in case you and your baby need medical care...](#)

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[Packing for hospital is an exciting part of preparing for the birth of your baby...](#)

- [Planning for labour and birth](#)

[Some of the signs and symptoms of going into labour may include period-like cramps, backache, diarrhoea and contractions...](#)

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[Multiple births are more common due to the advancing average age of mothers and the rise in assisted reproductive techniques...](#)

Preparing for a newborn

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[Let your baby feed as much as they want in the first few days to help establish good breastfeeding patterns...](#)

- [Breastfeeding - when to start](#)

[Breastfeeding within the first hour after birth allows your baby to behave instinctively and breastfeed with little intervention...](#)

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[There's no safe level of alcohol use during pregnancy. It's safest to not drink at all during pregnancy, when trying to conceive, and while breastfeeding...](#)

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[With low levels of vitamin K, some babies can have severe bleeding into the brain, causing significant brain damage...](#)

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[Even if your baby furniture meets every safety standard and recommendation, your child still needs close supervision...](#)

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