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## Placenta previa

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## Summary

- During pregnancy, the placenta provides the growing baby with oxygen and nutrients from the mother's bloodstream.
- Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by, which means the baby can't be born vaginally.
- Treatment aims to ease the symptoms and prolong the pregnancy until at least 36 weeks.

During pregnancy, the placenta provides the growing baby with oxygen and nutrients from the mother's bloodstream. Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, covering the cervix.

When a baby is ready to be born, the cervix (neck of the womb) dilates (opens) to allow the baby to move out of the uterus and into the vagina. When a woman has placenta previa (the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by), the baby can't be born vaginally. 'Partial placenta previa' means the cervix is partly blocked, while 'complete placenta previa' means the entire cervix is obstructed.

Some of the causes include scarring of the uterine lining (endometrium) and abnormalities of the placenta. Around one in every 200 pregnancies is affected.

## Symptoms

The most important symptom in placenta previa is painless vaginal bleeding after 20 weeks. However, there are causes of vaginal bleeding other than placenta previa. All bleeding during pregnancy should be reported to your doctor for prompt investigation and treatment.

## Why the bleeding happens

During the later stages of pregnancy, the bottom part of the uterus thins and spreads to accommodate the growing baby. If the placenta is anchored to the bottom of the uterus (as occurs with placenta previa), this thinning and spreading separates the placenta and causes bleeding.

Sexual intercourse can also cause bleeding from the placenta previa in later pregnancy. During labour, the cervix thins and dilates, which would normally allow the baby to exit into the vagina. In placenta previa, the dilation of the cervix further tears the placenta and causes bleeding.

## Possible complications

Some of the complications of placenta previa include:

- Major haemorrhage (bleeding) for the mother
- Shock from loss of blood
- Fetal distress from lack of oxygen
- Premature labour or delivery
- Health risks to the baby, if born prematurely
- Emergency caesarean delivery
- Hysterectomy, if the placenta fails to come away from the uterine lining
- Blood loss for the baby
- Death.

## Causes and risk factors

Some of the possible causes and risk factors of placenta previa include:

- Low implantation of the fertilised egg
- Abnormalities of the uterine lining, such as fibroids
- Scarring of the uterine lining (endometrium)
- Abnormalities of the placenta
- Multiple babies, such as twins
- Multiple pregnancies - a woman who has already had six or more deliveries has a risk of one in 20.

## Diagnosis methods

A pregnant woman who experiences any vaginal bleeding should be admitted to hospital and tested. Some of the tests used to diagnose placenta previa include:

- Ultrasound scan
- Feeling the mother's belly to establish the baby's position (the baby is sideways or presenting bottom-first in around one in three cases of placenta previa).

## Digital vaginal examinations should be strictly avoided

It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between placenta previa and placental abruption. Placental abruption is a condition where the placenta separates from the uterine wall. Both conditions are flagged by heavy bleeding of bright red blood.

A vaginal examination is often used to help diagnose placental abruption, but could trigger heavier bleeding in the case of placenta previa. An ultrasound scan should always be taken first, and digital (finger) vaginal examinations strictly avoided in the case of placenta previa.

The doctor may do a speculum vaginal examination very gently to make sure the bleeding is not coming from the cervix or vagina. Once the diagnosis is made, the pregnancy needs to be very carefully monitored. Placenta previa is a potentially life-threatening condition for both the mother and her baby.

## Treatment options vary

Treatment depends on a number of factors, including:

- Whether the placenta previa is complete or partial
- The exact location of the placenta
- The amount of blood lost
- The gestational age of the baby
- The position of the baby
- The health of the baby
- The health of the mother.

## Treatment during pregnancy

Medical treatment aims to ease the symptoms and prolong the pregnancy. Options may include:

- Bed rest.
- Hospitalisation.
- Close monitoring, such as using a fetal monitor and regularly checking the mother's vital signs (for example, blood pressure).
- Blood transfusion for the mother.
- Avoiding any activity that triggers uterine contractions or irritates the cervix, such as sexual intercourse or orgasms.

## Delivery

Once the baby is old enough to be delivered, a caesarean section is usually performed. The baby may need to be monitored in intensive care to make sure all is well. The mother will undergo a range of tests, including tests to check her blood cell counts and the clotting ability of her blood.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Obstetrician
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Always call an ambulance in an emergency Tel. 000
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100

## Things to remember

- During pregnancy, the placenta provides the growing baby with oxygen and nutrients from the mother's bloodstream.
- Placenta previa means the placenta has implanted at the bottom of the uterus, over the cervix or close by, which means the baby can't be born vaginally.
- Treatment aims to ease the symptoms and prolong the pregnancy until at least 36 weeks.

### [References](#)

- 'Placenta praevia' [online], in *The Merck Manual of Diagnosis and Therapy*, Section 18, Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Chapter 252, Abnormalities of Pregnancy. Eds R. Berkow, M. Beers, A. Fletcher & R. Bogin. Merck & Co. Inc., Whitehouse Station, NJ, USA. [More information here.](#)

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### Pregnancy and birth basics

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- [Childbirth - pain relief options](#)

[Understanding your pain relief options can help you cope better with the pain of childbirth...](#)

- [Pregnancy – labour](#)

[Labour is divided into three stages. The first stage is dilation of the cervix from 0 to 10 cm, the second stage is birth of the baby, and the third stage is delivery of the placenta. Labour typically...](#)

- [Pregnancy - premature labour](#)

[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 - week by week](#)

[Pregnancy is counted as 40 weeks, starting from the first day of the mother's last menstrual period...](#)

- [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](#)

[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...](#)

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

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

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- [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...](#)

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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...](#)

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[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...](#)

- [Ectopic pregnancy](#)

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- [Diabetes - gestational](#)



[Gestational diabetes is diabetes that occurs during pregnancy and usually disappears when the pregnancy is over...](#)

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

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