



# Endometriosis

A woman's reproductive cycles, marked by her periods, speak of her distinct place in the circle of life. For a small group of women however, menstruation is shadowed by intense abdominal pain that interferes with daily life. *MH* looks into the condition, endometriosis, its causes and its implications for day-to-day living, fertility and pregnancy.

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A woman's risk of having endometriosis is six times greater if her mother or sister has endometriosis; other risk factors are beginning menstruation at a young age, never having been pregnant, frequent menstrual cycles or periods lasting longer than a week.



The exact cause of endometriosis is unknown; genetic, autoimmune or environmental causes have been suggested. It is believed that endometrial cells

**E**ndometriosis occurs when tissue from the uterine lining, the endometrium, is found outside the uterus. The misplaced tissue may grow on 3 woman's ovaries, fallopian tubes, bowel, bladder or other pelvic areas.

Endometriosis affects 10 per cent of women and may begin anytime between puberty and menopause. However, Dr Chua Yang, specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist at A Clinic for Women, says, "Endometriosis is more commonly diagnosed in women above 35 years than in young girls, especially if they have not been pregnant or are investigating fertility. That is why the incidence is seemingly on the rise in our society where women tend to start their families later in life. However, occurrence is not limited strictly to this age group, and I have seen it in a young girl at 15."

reach areas surrounding the uterus because of *retrograde menstruation*.

*Retrograde menstruation* occurs during a period when blood flows back along the fallopian tubes into the pelvis. The endometrial cells outside of the uterus are usually broken down or absorbed. In women with endometriosis however, the pockets of tissue implant and grow. They function as they would in the womb, responding to hormonal changes during the woman's menstrual cycle. They thicken in preparation for pregnancy and, like the lining of the womb, break down and bleed when pregnancy does not occur.

The blood cannot leave the body, accumulates in surrounding areas and causes inflammation and adhesions between organs. If the patches of tissue grow and burrow into the ovaries, they form cysts.



## Warning Signs

### • Pain

Endometriosis symptoms range from minimal discomfort to debilitating pain. A woman with endometriosis may have:

- Lower abdominal pain during her periods (dull or intense pain)
- Lower abdominal pain one to two weeks before the period
- Pain during/ after sexual intercourse
- Pain with bowel movements, passing wind or urinating
- Pelvic/ low back pain that occurs at anytime through the menstrual cycle
- Abdominal pain during ovulation
- Symptoms related to the menstrual cycle include premenstrual symptoms, heavy or irregular periods
- Change in bowel and bladder patterns

Laparoscopy is the gold standard to confirm the diagnosis of endometriosis, says Dr Ng Ying Woo, associate consultant at the Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, NUH.

## How Is Endometriosis Treated?

Dr Chua Yang explains about treatment: "Endometriosis frequently presents with pain, ovarian cysts or is found during investigation for infertility.

Treatment targets the presenting problem; there is no known cure for endometriosis, as yet."

### • Medications

- Medications for pain relief, such as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs
- Medications to control the disease process including hormonal treatment/injections

NUH's Dr Ng explains, "We know that endometriosis is exacerbated by oestrogen. Hormonal therapy aims to temper with the level of oestrogen in the body, hoping to shrink the endometriotic implants, thereby reducing pain. Unfortunately, it has varying degrees of side effects and pain relief is often temporary."

### • Surgical options

Endometriotic cysts that increase in size should be removed surgically to avoid further damage to ovarian function, according to Dr Chua Yang.

## NOTE

The choice of medical or surgical treatment depends on the woman's age, the severity of her symptoms, the extent of her disease and whether she plans to have children in future.

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