

UNDERSTANDING ENDOMETRIOSIS AND UTERINE DISEASE

Key Facts

- Endometriosis impacts approximately 10% (190 million) of women and girls of reproductive age worldwide.
- This chronic condition is characterised by debilitating pain during menstruation, bowel movements, and/or urination, as well as chronic pelvic pain, abdominal bloating, nausea, fatigue, and in some cases, depression, anxiety, and infertility.
- Currently, there is no known cure for endometriosis, and treatment primarily focuses on symptom management.
- Access to early diagnosis and effective treatment is crucial, yet remains limited in many areas, particularly in low and middle-income countries.

WHAT IS ENDOMETRIOSIS?

Endometriosis is a chronic condition where tissue similar to the lining of the uterus (the endometrium) grows outside of the uterus.

This tissue can implant on the ovaries, fallopian tubes, the outer surface of the uterus, or other organs within the pelvis. Unlike the normal endometrial tissue, which sheds during a woman's menstrual cycle, the tissue outside the uterus doesn't have a way to exit the body, leading to inflammation, scarring, and adhesions.

Common Symptoms of Endometriosis



Endometriosis symptoms can vary widely and are often diverse, making it challenging for healthcare professionals to diagnose. Those experiencing symptoms may not be aware that they have the condition.

Symptoms occur when patches of endometriosis break down and bleed during your period but are unable to leave the body. Patients may experience various symptoms during their period, such as:

- **Painful menstrual cramps that can radiate to the abdomen (stomach) or lower back**
- **Diarrhoea or constipation during menstruation**
- **Fatigue or low energy**
- **Painful urination or bowel movements**
- **Spotting or bleeding between periods**

Causes and Risk Factors

While the exact cause of endometriosis is not fully understood, several theories exist, including:



Immune system disorders

A weakened immune system might not be able to recognise and destroy endometrial-like tissue growing outside the uterus.

Genetics

A family history of endometriosis can increase the risk of developing the condition.

Retrograde menstruation

Menstrual blood flows backward through the fallopian tubes into the pelvic cavity instead of exiting the body.

Environmental factors

Certain environmental toxins may contribute to the development of endometriosis.

Uterine Diseases: A Broader Look



In addition to endometriosis, there are other uterine diseases that can significantly impact women's reproductive health, including:

1. Uterine Fibroids

Uterine fibroids are non-cancerous growths in the uterus. They are the most common type of tumours in women and often appear during a woman's reproductive years. While many women with fibroids experience no symptoms, some may suffer from:

- Heavy menstrual bleeding.
- Frequent urination or difficulty emptying the bladder.
- Back or leg pain.

Fibroids can range in size from very small to large masses that distort the shape of the uterus. The exact cause of fibroids is unknown, but genetics, hormones (particularly oestrogen and progesterone), and lifestyle factors may play a role.

2. Uterine Polyps

Uterine polyps are growths in the lining of the uterus that can cause abnormal bleeding. They are often benign but may lead to infertility in some women.

Symptoms include:

- Irregular menstrual periods or bleeding between periods.
- Heavy or prolonged periods.
- Difficulty conceiving.

3. Uterine Cancer

Uterine cancer, or endometrial cancer, is one of the most common cancers of the reproductive organs. It usually affects postmenopausal women, but certain risk factors, such as obesity, hormone therapy, or a family history of cancer, can increase the likelihood of developing this disease.

Symptoms include:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding.
- Pelvic pain or discomfort.
- Unexplained weight loss.

Early detection is crucial for successful treatment, and regular gynaecological exams are recommended to monitor any changes in uterine health.



Diagnosis and Treatment of Endometriosis and Uterine Diseases

Diagnosis:

Doctors may suspect endometriosis based on patient medical history or physical exam and may use the following methods to diagnose the condition:

- Pelvic exams to check for abnormalities.
- Ultrasounds or MRI to visualise cysts, fibroids, or endometriosis lesions.
- Laparoscopy (a minimally invasive surgery) to confirm endometriosis by viewing the inside of the abdomen.

Treatment Options:

While there is no cure for endometriosis or most uterine diseases, crucial treatment options can help manage symptoms and improve quality of life:



1. Medications

- Pain relievers such as NSAIDs (e.g., ibuprofen).
- Hormonal therapies like birth control, IUDs, or GnRH agonists to reduce oestrogen levels and slow endometrial tissue growth.



2. Surgical Interventions

- Laparoscopic surgery can be performed to remove endometriosis lesions, fibroids, or polyps.
- In severe cases, a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) may be recommended.



3. Lifestyle Changes and Complementary Therapies

- A healthy diet, exercise, and stress management can help alleviate some symptoms.
- Acupuncture, physical therapy, and certain dietary supplements may provide relief for some women.



4. Treatments

For women struggling with infertility due to endometriosis or fibroids, options like IVF or other assisted reproductive technologies may be discussed.

Living with Endometriosis and Uterine Disease



Living with endometriosis or uterine diseases can be challenging, but it's important to remember that you are not alone. Connecting with support groups, speaking to healthcare professionals who understand your condition, and having a tailored treatment plan can help manage symptoms and maintain a good quality of life.

Early diagnosis and personalised treatment are essential for managing these conditions and improving your well-being.