

Endometriosis

What is endometriosis?

The tissue lining your uterus (womb) is called the *endometrium*. Each menstrual cycle part of it grows and becomes engorged with blood and then is shed as a period. *Endometriosis* is a condition in which fragments of the endometrium grow in other places such as the wall of the uterus, the ovaries, the ligaments inside the pelvis, the Fallopian tubes and on other pelvic organs.

Each cycle, the blood from these fragments cannot escape because it is embedded in tissue in the pelvis. Small blood blisters develop and irritate the tissues.

There are many theories about the cause of endometriosis, but we do not fully understand how it comes about.

What are the symptoms?

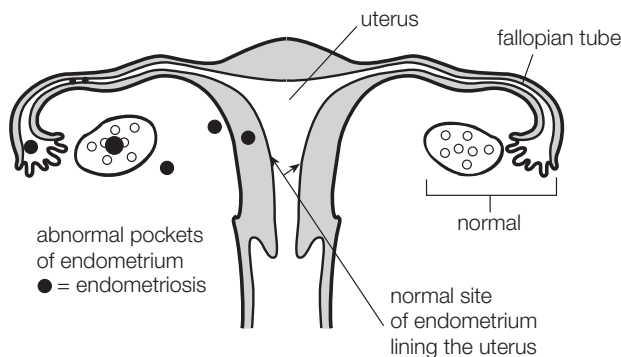
- Painful or heavy periods
- A dragging pain in the back, pelvis or abdomen during periods
- Ovulation pain
- Pain during intercourse
- Nausea and lethargy

You may have only one or two of these symptoms, and they can vary in severity from one person to another.

Many women with endometriosis have no symptoms at all, or have symptoms so mild that they pass unnoticed.

How common is endometriosis?

Endometriosis is a common problem, especially in its mild form. About 1 woman in 10 will have it to some degree, but only 1 in 100 will be affected by it. About 20% of women investigated for infertility will be diagnosed as having endometriosis.



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Who gets endometriosis?

It can occur between puberty and menopause in any woman and appears most often between the ages of 25 and 35. It is more common in women who have not had children. It is not known why endometriosis occurs in some women and not in others. It is more common in some families.

How is it diagnosed?

It is indicated by the symptoms, but the only accurate method of diagnosis is by directly seeing the condition with a small tube called a *laparoscope* passed through a small cut into the abdomen. The spots of endometriosis are seen as small red or black lumps.

What should be done?

If you are suffering from painful periods and other symptoms that suggest endometriosis you will be referred to a gynaecologist, who will probably perform a laparoscopy before making a firm diagnosis.

What are the risks?

Endometriosis is a common cause of infertility. It can cause painful cysts inside the pelvis, and can affect the ovaries or the uterus. An operation may be necessary to remove the cysts, repair the ovaries or remove the uterus, but these measures are not usually necessary.

What is the treatment?

Many women do not require treatment apart from analgesics for pain. If necessary, however, endometriosis can be treated with drugs or surgery or both.

Surgical treatment

The ovaries and uterus are usually left intact but the endometrial tissue is destroyed by heat or laser and scar tissue is removed. The aim is to reduce symptoms and improve fertility.

Medical treatment

Hormone treatment with one of the contraceptive pills, progestogens or danazol, aims to suppress the menstrual cycle, causing the endometrial cells to shrink and, hopefully, disappear. Hormones are usually taken for 6 to 12 months. Anti-inflammatory medication may be helpful.