

What You Should Know About Uterine Fibroids

Uterine fibroids are tumors that women commonly develop on or within their uterus. Although rarely cancerous, they can sometimes cause problems and may need to be treated.

What are uterine fibroids?

Uterine fibroids are noncancerous (benign) tumors that develop in the womb (uterus) and can remain very small, such as the size of an apple seed, or can grow to the size of a grapefruit. Most women who get fibroids have more than one.

Who is at increased risk?

Fibroids are common in women over 20 years of age. One in 5 women of childbearing age will have fibroids, and by the time they reach age 50, over half of all women will have uterine fibroids. In addition to increasing age, other factors that increase the risk of fibroids are having a family member with fibroids, being African-American, and being overweight. Women who have fibroids are more likely to have problems during pregnancy and delivery; however, most have normal pregnancies.

What causes uterine fibroids?

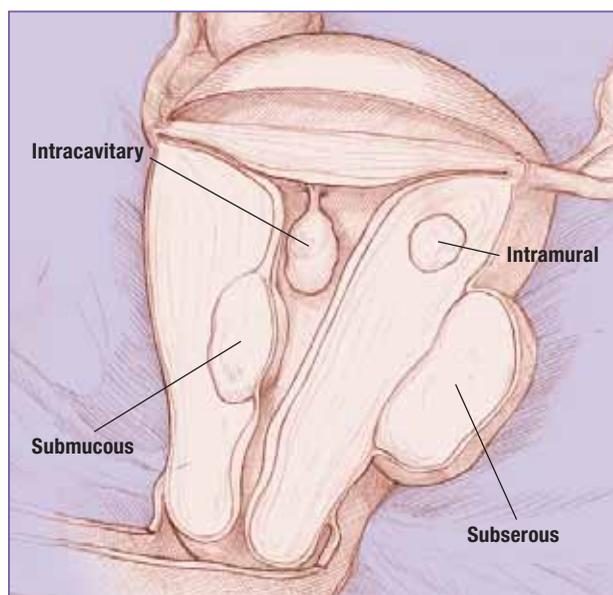
Why women get fibroids or why some grow more than others is unknown. However, since fibroids grow rapidly when hormone levels are high (for example, during pregnancy) and shrink when levels are low (for example, after menopause), researchers believe that hormones like estrogen play a role. As long as a woman is menstruating, a fibroid will probably continue to slowly grow.

What are the symptoms of uterine fibroids?

Most fibroids do not cause symptoms, and you may never know that you had one. But some women do have symptoms, with the most common being bleeding between menstrual periods, heavy menstrual bleeding, longer or painful periods, feeling of fullness or pressure in the lower stomach, the need to urinate more frequently, and pain during intercourse. During menopause, fibroids often shrink and stop causing symptoms.

How are fibroids diagnosed?

Your doctor may find that you have fibroids during a regular pelvic examination by feeling it with his or her fingers. To confirm the diagnosis, your doctor will usually have you undergo pelvic ultrasound and sometimes magnetic resonance imaging (an MRI scan), both of which create a “picture” of the inside of your body without surgery. In some cases, surgery may be needed. The two types of surgery for diagnosing fibroids are laparoscopy and hysteroscopy. With laparoscopy, a



long thin scope with a camera and light is inserted into a small surgical incision near the navel; hysteroscopy involves passing the scope through the vagina and cervix to view the inside of the uterus. A biopsy may be taken at this time to make sure the fibroid is not cancerous. The chance of a fibroid being cancerous is extremely rare, with less than one in a thousand occurring. Also, you should know that having fibroids does not increase your risk of cancer.

How are uterine fibroids treated?

Most women with fibroids do not have symptoms. If you have fibroids but don't have any symptoms, you may not need treatment. Your doctor will likely monitor the fibroid's growth during regular pelvic exams and occasionally using ultrasound. If you do need to be treated, your doctor will choose a treatment based on several factors, including the severity of your symptoms, if you are planning to become pregnant in the future, the size and location of your fibroids, and your age.

To reduce bleeding, you may be given birth control pills or tranexamic acid tablets or an intrauterine device (IUD). For pain, ibuprofen or an IUD may be prescribed. To shrink the fibroid, you may receive short-term hormonal therapy injections or uterine fibroid embolization, which is a common, nonsurgical procedure that stops the blood supply to the fibroid. Alternatively, the fibroid may need to be surgically removed.

To learn more, there are several sites online: the National Uterine Fibroids Foundation at www.nuff.org, Center for Uterine Fibroids at www.fibroids.net, and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) Resource Center at www.acog.org.

Adapted from the National Women's Health Information Center.