



Endometriosis: What it is and how it is treated

What is endometriosis?

The word *endometriosis* comes from the word *endometrium*, the tissue that lines the inside of the uterus. In women who are not pregnant, this tissue goes through a cycle each month in which it builds up and then sheds, causing bleeding that is discharged through the vagina (menstruation, or “period”).

Endometriosis is the growth of endometrial tissue *outside* the uterus. This misplaced tissue goes through the same menstrual cycle as the normal endometrium, except that the bleeding is not discharged from the body, and surrounding tissues may become painfully irritated, swollen, inflamed, and scarred.

Endometriosis can cause a wide variety of symptoms, such as mild or severe pelvic or back pain only during menstruation, or constant pelvic pain with bowel and bladder symptoms. Some women with endometriosis have difficulty getting pregnant.

Endometriosis is not cancer and does not increase a woman’s risk of uterine cancer or other cancers.

Endometriosis may worsen with time, or it may remain stable or improve.

How is endometriosis treated?

Mild endometriosis. If your endometriosis is mild, your doctor may prescribe an over-the-counter medication for pain, such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, Nuprin) or naproxen sodium (Aleve). Pain also can be treated with prescription birth control pills if you do not wish to become pregnant.

Mild to moderate endometriosis. If you have mild to moderate pain and do not wish to become pregnant, your doctor may suggest treatment with a hormone to reduce the size of endometrial tissue. This treatment is not a cure, however, and once you stop taking the treatment, the problem usually returns. Commonly prescribed hormone treatments include progesterone (progestins), danazol (Danocrine), and gonadotropin-releasing hormone agonists. Your doctor will explain how they work and their side effects.

Moderate to severe endometriosis. Surgery to remove the misplaced endometrium may be the best option if your pain is moderate or severe and you are trying to get pregnant. In one procedure, the surgeon removes scar tissue by cutting (excision) or burning (ablation) it away, performing the operation through a very small incision using a thin tube called a laparoscope. If your endometriosis is severe, your doctor may recommend surgery to remove all or some of your reproductive organs. This would mean you would no longer be able to get pregnant.