

Vulva, vagina, ovaries & uterus

This fact sheet discusses conditions of the uterus, ovaries and cervix including what is adenomyosis, what causes fibroids, tests for cervical cancer, and what are the symptoms of ovarian cancer. Information is also provided on hysterectomy.

Adenomyosis

Adenomyosis is a condition of the uterus (womb) where the cells that normally form a lining on the inside of the uterus also grow in the muscle wall of the uterus.

The cause of adenomyosis is unknown, but there are a number of theories:

- The lining cells invade into the muscle layer as a result of surgery
- Lining tissue was deposited into the uterine muscle early in foetal life, before birth
- Inflammation of the lining after childbirth causes cells to pass into the weakened muscle layer

Fibroids

Fibroids (also known as uterine fibromyomas, leiomyomas or myomas) are non-cancerous growths or lumps of muscle tissue that form within the walls of the uterus (womb).

Fibroids can vary in size ranging from the size of a pea to the size of a rockmelon or larger. It is not known exactly why fibroids occur, however the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone play a significant role in stimulating the growth of fibroids as fibroids occur in women of reproductive age, growing at varying rates until the onset of menopause.

After menopause, they tend to decrease in size and may slowly disappear. Some things increase your risk of getting fibroids such as early onset of periods, obesity, a family history of fibroids, high blood pressure and never having given birth.



Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is a cancer that develops in a woman's cervix. The cervix is the entrance to the uterus (womb) from the vagina. The most common cause of cervical cancer is the human papilloma virus (HPV). Regular Pap smear tests are vital to check on changes to the cells in your cervix and alert you if there are any abnormal cells. It is the second most common cancer experienced by women worldwide, particularly in countries with low rates of Pap smear testing. Cervical cancer vaccines are now also available. Talk with your doctor about when your Pap smear test is due.

Ovarian cancer

Ovarian cancer is a cancer in one or both of the ovaries. It is important to know the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer. These may include bloating, frequent urination (with no infection), back pain, heartburn, pain during intercourse and unexplained bleeding. Ovarian cancer is difficult to detect in the early stages. It usually starts as a painless lump on the ovary that gradually enlarges. As there is room for it to grow, it does not cause clear symptoms until it is quite large.

Things that increase the risk of ovarian cancer include age, family history, not ever having had children and experiencing a late menopause.

Hysterectomy

A hysterectomy is an operation to remove the uterus (womb). A total hysterectomy means both the uterus and the cervix are removed.

A total hysterectomy does not mean the ovaries are removed. If the ovaries are removed this is a hysterectomy with oophorectomy (removal of the ovaries).

There are many reasons for having a hysterectomy including cancer, heavy and continuous bleeding, adenomyosis, multiple fibroids, endometriosis and severe pelvic pain. Except when there is cancer or uncontrollable life threatening bleeding, making the decision to have a hysterectomy can be difficult. The decision to have a hysterectomy should be made after you have been given adequate information about why you need one, how the surgery will be performed, what will happen to your body and what the consequences may be. It is also important to think about how you may feel about losing your uterus and whether you need help and support coping with those feelings.

What can you do?

Have regular Pap smear tests

Regular Pap smear tests can prevent 9 out of 10 cervical cancers. Most women diagnosed with cervical cancer have not had regular Pap smear tests. A Pap smear test checks for changes to the cells of the cervix, it does not test for or diagnose cervical cancer. These changes can almost always be treated if found early.

See your doctor

If you experience any of these symptoms – abdominal bloating, difficulty eating, constipation, heartburn, a pressure sensation on the bowel, bladder or back, severe back pain, urinary frequency, severe fatigue, heavy bleeding, painful sex – and these symptoms are a change from the normal for you, persist for more than 2 weeks and there is no other explanation for you having these symptoms, see your doctor.

Seek help if you are worried

It is not okay to have severe pelvic pain and is not normal. If the pain is so severe that you are missing school, work and other activities, or it is impacting on your relationship, please get help.

For more information go to jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/vulva-vagina-ovaries-uterus

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner. References are available on request.

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