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WOMEN'S HEALTH: ENDOMETRIOSIS

Endometriosis affects more than 6 million women in the United States, making it one of the most common health problems in women.

What is It?

Endometriosis is a condition where endometrium, the tissue that lines the uterus, grows in other places in the body besides the uterus. It develops into small growths or lesions which respond to the menstrual cycle in the same way uterine lining does. Most endometriosis is found on or under the ovaries, behind the uterus, on the tissues that hold the uterus in place, on the bowels or on the bladder. Endometrial growths cannot leave the body, resulting in inflammation, internal bleeding and scar tissue. Sometimes the growths also form cysts in the ovaries.

Causes and Risk Factors

There is no known cause for endometriosis, but a few risk factors have been identified:

- Never had children
- Periods that last more than seven days
- A short monthly cycle
- A family history
- Damage from an infection in the pelvis

Signs and Symptoms

The most common symptom of endometriosis is pain in the abdomen, lower back and pelvis. Other indicators of the disease may be:

- Intensely painful menstrual cramps
- Pain during or after sex

- Painful bowel movements or painful urination during menstrual periods
- Heavy and/or long menstrual periods
- Spotting and/or bleeding between periods
- Infertility
- Fatigue

Treatment

There is no cure for endometriosis, but several treatments are available for the pain and the infertility it may cause:

- Pain medication
- Hormone therapy such as birth control pills or progestins
- Surgery

Prevention

Since its cause is not known, it is difficult to know what can prevent endometriosis. However, some studies have shown that exercising regularly and avoiding large amounts of alcohol and caffeine can lower the chances of its onset. For more information, visit the Endometriosis Association at www.endometriosisassn.org.

Source: The Office of Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

