- Women—diseases



COMMERCIAL DISTRIBUTION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED
PRINTED FROM PRESSREADER
NOT FOR SALE
periodicalqcpublicliberary@gmail.com
PERSONAL COPY

Green screen

Several studies show that women who eat more vegies have a lower risk of fibroids, most likely due to their inflammation-reducing properties.

SOURCE: NUTRIENTS 2023

Fighting fibroids

GP Dr Sarah Brewer explains the best way of dealing with this common gynaecological condition.

I nearly lost my mum because of fibroids. She was found on the bathroom floor following a catastrophic haemorrhage and I remember an overnight dash to visit her in hospital – she was the same colour as the bedsheets, having lost nearly three litres of blood! Fortunately, she was found and treated in time to save her life, but this experience, although rare, underlines how serious fibroids can be. Here's what they are, what symptoms to look for and how you can win the battle against these little guys.

WHAT ARE FIBROIDS?

- The term fibroids is a bit misleading as most contain very little fibrous tissue. They're more properly known as leiomyomas, which means smooth muscle growths. These benign (non-cancerous) tumours consist of 'knots' of smooth muscle fibres that can form in any muscle in the body, but most often occur in the wall of the uterus.

- Fibroids are the most common gynaecological condition, with about two out of three women affected at some point in their life. They're seen most frequently between the ages of 35 and 45, seldom occur before the age of 20 and rarely develop for the first time after menopause, as their growth is oestrogen-related. Once menopause occurs, existing fibroids tend to regress, although hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can sometimes reactivate their growth.

- In women with light skin, fibroids are most common in those who have not had children, while in women of African descent, fibroids tend to occur at a younger age, often in late teens or early 20s, despite normal fertility. The reasons for this difference are unknown.

HOW FIBROIDS FORM

A fibroid starts as a tiny clump of muscle cells that create an interlacing bundle. These cells grow at a faster rate than the surrounding muscle fibres to form a solid ball that expands and compresses normal muscle around it. Fibroids can be as small as a pea or as big as a grapefruit. While you can have a single fibroid, they're more often multiple. Fibroids can arise in any part of the uterus. Some grow in the middle of the uterine wall to cause local thickening, others form beneath the lining to bulge into the womb cavity or near the other surface of the uterus, pushing into the pelvic cavity.

What causes fibroids?

Fibroids are thought to result when uterine smooth muscle cells become overly sensitive to oestrogen, which stimulates the growth of tissues throughout the body, including the womb lining. Although it's difficult to understand why such a response is localised to certain parts of the uterine wall, this theory is supported by the fact that fibroids tend to enlarge in some women with unusually high oestrogen levels, for example, from pregnancy, oestrogen-containing oral contraceptive pills or HRT, and in some women who are overweight (because fatty tissues make oestrogen from other sex hormones in the body).

Symptoms to look for

1 In many cases, fibroids cause no symptoms, especially if they're small. Even a large fibroid can go undetected if it doesn't press on your body's organs, such as the bladder. You may notice a sensation of fullness, pressure and dragging feelings, bloating, abdominal swelling and a feeling of a heavy lump in the pelvis. Pressure from a fibroid can cause bowel or bladder symptoms, such as constipation or a frequent need to urinate.

2 The most common symptom, affecting at least a third of women with fibroids, is abnormal vaginal bleeding – usually during menstruation but occasionally between periods. Fibroids can enlarge the surface area of the womb lining. This means there's more endometrium (tissue in uterus) to shed during a menstrual period and heavy bleeding results.

3 The presence of a large muscle growth in the uterine wall increases the number and size of blood vessels supplying the womb, making a heavy period more likely. And fibroids are linked to high oestrogen levels, which stimulate the growth of the endometrium, so there's more tissue to shed. Fibroids also distort the uterus and interfere with the normal contraction of the uterus during a period, which may prevent the closing of bleeding arteries, so the period continues for longer. This can cause cramping and painful periods.

4 If bleeding is heavy, flooding can occur with large clots and you may develop iron-deficiency anaemia with pallor, fatigue, dizziness and faintness.

Seeking help

- Despite being so common, fibroids are relatively unknown as a condition. This can mean women don't get support when experiencing symptoms. If you battle heavy, painful periods, pelvic pressure or red-flag symptoms, such as bloating, weight loss and unexpected vaginal bleeding, talk to a GP.
- A pelvic ultrasound or MRI will confirm the number, size and location of fibroids. Blood tests will show if you're anaemic as a result of heavy periods.
- In some cases, no treatment is needed. If you're experiencing troublesome symptoms, you'll be referred to a gynaecologist. Treatments include hormonal contraception, clotting medicine, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or cyclical progestogens. The drug linzagolix, sold under the brand name Yselty, is available to treat severe symptoms. A specialist may prescribe gonadotrophin-releasing hormone analogues that mimic menopause to help shrink large fibroids.
- Interventional radiology procedures include blocking the blood supply to fibroids, if you wish to avoid surgery. Removal of the endometrium, fibroid removal or a hysterectomy may be suggested if fibroids do not respond to drug treatments. P

PHOTOGRAPHY: ISTOCK

COMMERCIAL DISTRIBUTION IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED • PRINTED FROM PRESSREADER • NOT FOR RESALE • PERSONAL COPY