



REPRODUCTIVE
CHOICES

Ectopic pregnancy

Information
and advice

www.MSIChoices.org.uk

What is an ectopic pregnancy?

An ectopic pregnancy is a pregnancy that develops in the wrong place. A normal pregnancy implants inside the uterus (also known as the womb) but an ectopic implants somewhere else, most commonly within the fallopian tubes.

Ectopic pregnancies can also sometimes occur within a caesarean section scar, in the cervix or at the point where the fallopian tube connects to the uterus.

Ectopic pregnancy is estimated to occur in 11 out of every 1,000 pregnancies.

Tubal ectopic pregnancy

A tubal ectopic pregnancy is when a pregnancy implants within the fallopian tubes. This is the most common form of ectopic pregnancy and accounts for 95% of them.

The fallopian tubes are the tubes connected to the uterus that are responsible for picking up an egg each month. As the egg travels down the tube, it may meet sperm and become fertilised. In a normal pregnancy, this fertilised egg implants in the uterus, but in certain circumstances it gets 'stuck' on its journey down and becomes a tubal ectopic pregnancy.

A tubal ectopic pregnancy won't develop into a normal pregnancy and, if left untreated, it could rupture the fallopian tube. This could cause severe internal bleeding and, therefore, needs to be treated as a medical emergency.

What causes a tubal ectopic pregnancy?

Ectopic pregnancy is a natural occurrence and often no cause is found. However there are certain factors that can increase a woman's risk:

- Previous ectopic pregnancy. Having an ectopic pregnancy before increases the risk of one happening again.
- Damage to the fallopian tubes. Surgery to the fallopian tubes or damage caused by previous pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) can increase the risk.
- Pregnancy with an intrauterine device (IUD) fitted. People who become pregnant when they have an IUD in place (often known as a coil) are at greater risk of ectopic pregnancy; but the risk of falling pregnant with a coil fitted is low.

What are the symptoms of a tubal ectopic pregnancy?

Not everyone experiences symptoms of tubal ectopic pregnancy. Sometimes it is only identified on a scan or using blood tests to look at the pregnancy hormone levels.

In some cases women do experience symptoms such as:

- Sharp, stabbing pains in the lower abdomen
- Pain in the shoulder tip area
- Weakness, dizziness and fainting
- Vaginal bleeding
- Gastrointestinal symptoms (vomiting and/or diarrhoea).

How is a tubal ectopic treated?

As tubal ectopic pregnancies don't develop normally, abortion medication won't work to treat them. Therefore, you will need to be referred to a hospital for treatment.

The treatment you receive will depend on your symptoms and the size of the ectopic pregnancy, but options include:

- **Surgery.** This is the most common way to treat a tubal ectopic pregnancy. This may be a laparoscopy (keyhole surgery) or a laparotomy (open surgery). Often the fallopian tube will need to be removed but, in some circumstances, it may be possible to remove the pregnancy from the tube.
- **Medical treatment.** In certain circumstances, an ectopic can be treated with a drug called Methotrexate, which stops the cells of the pregnancy developing. This method may require several follow-up appointments.
- **Conservative (watch and wait) treatment.** If you are well, the ectopic is small and there are no signs of any bleeding in the abdomen, it may be possible to avoid intervention and just monitor the ectopic as it resolves naturally. Multiple follow-up appointments may still be needed.

Non-tubal ectopic pregnancy

Less frequently, an ectopic pregnancy might implant somewhere other than the fallopian tube. These can be more difficult to diagnose. These ectopic pregnancies may be attached to the caesarean section scar, the cervix or the part of the uterus the fallopian tube connects to.

Non-tubal ectopic pregnancies won't respond to abortion medication either, so you will need to be referred to hospital for treatment. Treatment will depend on the location and gestation of the pregnancy but may be surgical, medical or a combination of the two.

What to do if you think you have an ectopic pregnancy

If you are worried you might be experiencing an ectopic pregnancy it is important you seek medical help as soon as possible. If you experience severe pain or feel very faint or dizzy attend A&E as soon as possible.

If you have any questions or concerns about ectopic pregnancy, don't forget our team is here for you 24 hours a day. You can call us any time on 0345 122 1441.

Where can I get more information?

The Ectopic Pregnancy Trust

www.ectopic.org.uk

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Ectopic-pregnancy

Miscarriage Association

www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk

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