

## Fact sheet

# Uterine fibroids

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### What are uterine fibroids?

Fibroids (also called myomas) are benign tumours (harmless growths) which develop in smooth muscle.

Fibroids can develop in any smooth muscle in the body but are more common in the uterus than elsewhere.

Uterine fibroids are the commonest harmless tumours found in humans. Up to 80% of black women, 70% of white women and a smaller proportion of Asian women will develop at least one fibroid between the age of 15 and 50 years.

### What do fibroids look like?

- They look like peeled potatoes – round, cream, smooth and firm
- They can be any size varying from smaller than a pea to larger than a rock melon. After about age 50 years, when the periods cease, (called the menopause) fibroids almost always begin to shrink
- Fibroids can occur in any number – from one to dozens. Many women have more than one.



Laparoscopic image of fibroid uterus



### Why do uterine fibroids develop?

A fibroid begins from a mutation (genetic change) in a single smooth muscle cell. This mutation causes the cells to produce large amounts of proteins and grow into a tumour.

### The following factors increase the risk of fibroids developing

- **Age:** Most fibroids develop during the 30s and 40s and so they are more common in a 45 year old woman than a 25 year old
- **Family History:** Some families have a strong tendency to fibroids – if your mother or aunt have fibroids, your chance of developing them is higher
- **Body Weight / Obesity:** Overweight women develop fibroids more commonly than slim women and the risk increases with how much weight a woman is carrying. This could be related to increased production of the female hormone, estrogen, in the body's fat stores
- **Effects of Diet:** Eating a lot of red meat seems to increase the risk while a diet rich in green vegetables and salad may reduce the risk
- **Not Having Had Children:** Pregnancy reduces the chance of getting fibroids in some women.

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### Are fibroids cancer? Can they turn into cancer?

Fibroids are benign (harmless). They are not cancer and do not turn into cancer. Very rarely a completely different genetic mutation of a muscle cell in the uterus can occur and cause a cancerous tumour called a sarcoma.

- A fibroid does not turn into a sarcoma, rather a sarcoma is a separate new growth
- While a sarcoma might rarely develop within a fibroid, it can just as easily develop within a normal uterus. This means that women with fibroids have the same chance of developing a sarcoma as women without fibroids
- While fibroids mostly occur in women in their 30s and 40s and become smaller after 50 years of age, sarcomas usually develop in women in their 50s, 60s and 70s.

### What problems can fibroids cause?

Most women with fibroids have no problems at all and 4 out of 5 women won't need treatment. In fact, most women with fibroids don't even know they are there, while others find out only because a doctor feels the fibroid or an ultrasound is done for another reason and detects the fibroid.

However, sometimes fibroids cause problems, especially if they are very large or if they are in a tricky position, such as bulging into the uterine cavity (called submucosal fibroids - see next section). The problems fibroids can cause include;

### Period problems

- Heavy periods- sometimes the bleeding is enough to cause anaemia ('thin' blood from loss of iron)
- Bleeding between periods- this spotting usually happens with submucosal fibroids
- Period pain – this also tends happen with submucosal fibroids

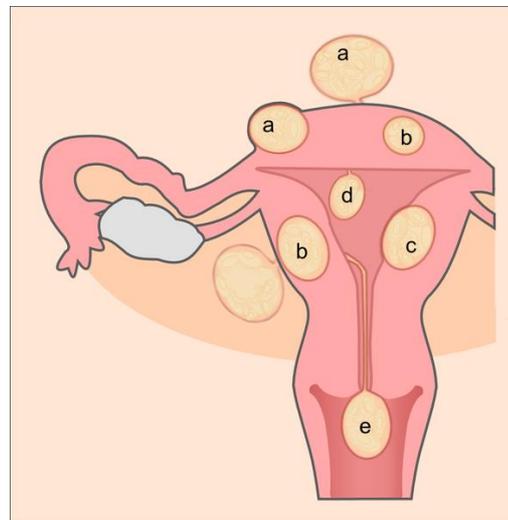
**Pressure symptoms** – a feeling of heaviness in the pelvis which can also lead to

- pressure on the bladder and, less often, on the bowel
- occasionally low back pain
- being aware of a 'lump' in the lower abdomen

### Fertility and pregnancy issues (see factsheet)

#### Why does the location of a fibroid matter?

Fibroids are described according to how close they are to the inside (uterine cavity) or outside of the uterus (see diagram). The position of a fibroid can play a big role in whether or not fibroids cause problems. Basically, there are 3 key location groups – intramural, submucosal and subserosal



A – Subserous fibroids

B – Intramural fibroids

C – Submucous fibroid

D – Submucous fibroid with a short stalk

E – Submucous fibroid with a long stalk

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### **Intramural (muscle wall) fibroids**

- These develop within the uterine muscle wall and are the most common type of fibroid
- They only cause symptoms if they become quite large or start to grow into the uterine cavity
- The problems they cause include heavy periods and sometimes pressure on the bladder or bowel.

### **Submucosal (cavity or inner uterus) fibroids**

- These arise in or near the uterine cavity
- Because the cavity is supposed to be empty, even a small fibroid growing into it can cause significant problems
- In general, heavy bleeding, bleeding between periods, period pain and fertility/miscarriage issues are more common with submucosal fibroids.

### **Subserosal (outer uterus) fibroids**

- These arise at or near the outside of the uterus
- These generally cause the least problems because they are well away from the cavity of the uterus.

### **What follow up do I need for my fibroids?**

Whenever any abnormality is found, it is normal to worry and to seek reassurance.

- Most fibroid uteruses are not large or causing any problems and most fibroids are diagnosed 'accidentally' after a pelvic examination or ultrasound.
- Fibroids are benign and the chance of developing cancer in the muscle of the uterus (sarcoma) is the same in women with and without fibroids.

**Routine follow up of fibroids is not usually required.**

**However, if you develop symptoms or feel your uterus is enlarging quickly, you should see your doctor for review.**

For further information on Fibroids see fact sheets on;

*Uterine fibroids – fertility and pregnancy*

*Uterine fibroids-Treatment Options*

**We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.**

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