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WOMEN'S HEALTH: FIBROIDS

Uterine fibroids are the most common non-cancerous tumors in women of childbearing age. Fibroids may grow as a single tumor or develop in clusters.

What are they?

Fibroids are made of muscle cells and other tissues, which grow in and around the wall of the uterus. Their cause is unknown, but research suggests that high levels of progesterone and estrogen may play a role in their development. Fibroids are usually detected in women in their thirties or forties, and occur in about 25 percent of all women in the United States.

Risk Factors

Fibroids are two to three times more common in African-American women than in Caucasian women. Women who are overweight or who have never given birth also run a higher risk of developing fibroids.

Symptoms

Many women with this condition have no symptoms at all. Of the symptoms that do occur, these are the most common:

- Heavy or painful periods
- Bleeding between periods
- Feeling “full” in the lower abdomen or having pelvic pressure
- Urinating often
- Pain during intercourse
- Lower back pain
- Reproductive problems

It is important to realize that many of the symptoms, especially bleeding between periods, are not strictly associated with having fibroids. Talk to your physician if you are concerned, and he or she will be able to diagnose you properly. It should also be noted that most women with fibroids can get pregnant naturally.

Treatment

If you have no symptoms, you may not need treatment. For those women who are struggling to get pregnant, infertility treatments may help. Another method of managing fibroids includes medicines, which can slow or stop their growth.

A primary surgical treatment for fibroids causing severe symptoms is a hysterectomy, in which the uterus is removed. The advantage of this procedure is that it is the only “cure” for fibroids, but is only an option for women not planning to have future pregnancies. For those who do wish to get pregnant, a myomectomy surgery removes individual fibroids. However, there is a significant risk of recurrence of fibroids even after this procedure.

Prevention

Although fibroids cannot always be prevented, there are some measures you can take to give yourself the best possible chance of not developing them:

- Avoid weight gain after age 18; body weight tends to increase estrogen production.
- Exercise—Not only will it help keep weight under control, but it stunts hormone production, which may aggravate fibroid growth.
- Schedule routine health checkups with your physician.

For more information, visit the Center for Uterine Fibroids at www.fibroids.net.