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Will fibroids affect my health?

Q I am a 35-year-old woman. During my recent health screening, I discovered that I have some fibroids. How did they form and how big can they grow? Will they affect my health?

A Fibroids are generally non-cancerous growths in the muscle layer of the womb, which can affect 25 to 30 per cent of women in the reproductive age group of around 16 to 50 years of age.

It is still unknown how fibroids form, but they may be related to female hormones, estrogen and progesterone, thus they tend to shrink in size after menopause when the hormone levels drop.

Fibroids are more likely to be found in women who have a family history of fibroids, as well as those who were never pregnant, who are obese, or have hypertension or diabetes.

The size of fibroids can range from less than 1cm to 10cm or bigger.

They can grow into the womb cavity, grow in the muscle layer of the womb, or grow out of the surface of the womb.

What are the symptoms?

Most fibroids do not cause symptoms, but if they do, these are some of them:

- **Heavy menstrual bleeding:** This happens if the fibroids grow into the cavity of the womb and cause distortion of the womb lining. The heavy periods may result in anaemia in some women.
- **Pelvic pain or pressure; problems with urinating or passing motion:** If the fibroids grow out from the surface of the womb, they can cause pressure and obstruction to the bladder and



In most cases, fibroids do not cause any symptoms but some women may experience heavy menstrual bleeding and pelvic pain.

PHOTO: ISTOCK

the intestines.

- **Severe abdominal pain:** Pregnant women may experience this if the fibroids undergo degeneration during pregnancy.
- **Infertility:** Problems getting pregnant may occur if the fibroids grow into the womb cavity and cause distortion of the womb cavity.

What should I do?

It is advisable to see a doctor when you have heavy or prolonged menses, problems with passing urine and/or motion, abdominal pain, abdominal distension or problems getting pregnant.

Even if your fibroids do not cause any symptoms, it is wise to see your doctor regularly to keep track of possible changes that may require intervention.

In rare cases, cancerous growths such as leiomyosarcomas may be formed by the rapidly growing fibroids in the womb.

What are the treatments available?

If your fibroids are causing symptoms, you can opt for medications to relieve the symptoms,

such as medicines that help reduce menstrual flow, or iron tablets to help with anaemia.

There are also hormonal medications to help shrink the fibroids, but they can have side effects.

For fibroids that cause troublesome symptoms and cannot be controlled by medication, surgery can be considered.

Surgical options include removing just the fibroids (myomectomy) or removing the whole womb (hysterectomy). The procedure can be done as open surgery or keyhole surgery.

There are also non-surgical options, but every patient needs to be assessed individually on the likelihood of cure and possible side effects of these treatment options.

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