

Ovarian Cysts

Ovarian cysts are fluid-filled sacs in the ovary. They are very common and usually form during ovulation. Ovulation happens when the ovary releases an egg each month. Many women with ovarian cysts don't have symptoms. The cysts are usually harmless.

Q: What are the different types of ovarian cysts?

A: The two most common types of ovarian cysts (called functional cysts) form during the menstrual cycle. They are usually benign (not cancerous).

- Follicle cysts. In a normal menstrual cycle, the egg grows inside a tiny sac called a follicle. When the egg matures, the follicle breaks open to release the egg. Follicle cysts form when the follicle doesn't break open to release the egg. This causes the follicle to continue growing into a cyst. These cysts often have no symptoms and go away in one to three months.
- Corpus luteum cysts. Once the follicle breaks open and releases the egg, the empty follicle sac shrinks into a mass of cells called corpus luteum. Corpus luteum makes hormones to prepare for the next egg for the next menstrual cycle. Corpus luteum cysts form if the sac doesn't shrink. Instead, the sac reseals itself after the egg is released. Then fluid builds up inside. Most corpus luteum cysts go away after a few weeks, but they can grow to almost four inches wide. They also may bleed or twist the ovary and cause pain.

Q: What causes ovarian cysts?

A: The most common causes of ovarian cysts include:

- Hormonal problems. Functional cysts usually go away on their own without treatment. They may be caused by hormonal problems or by drugs used to help you ovulate.
- Endometriosis. Endometriosis happens when the lining of the uterus (womb) grows outside of the uterus. Women with endometriosis can develop a type of ovarian cyst called an endometrioma. The endometriosis tissue may attach to the ovary and form a growth. These cysts can be painful during sex and during your period.
- Pregnancy. An ovarian cyst normally develops in early pregnancy to help support the pregnancy until the placenta forms. Sometimes, the cyst stays on the ovary until later in the pregnancy and may need to be removed.
- Severe pelvic infections. Infections can spread to the ovaries and fallopian tubes and cause cysts to form.

Q: What are the symptoms of ovarian cysts?

A: Most ovarian cysts are small and don't cause symptoms. If a cyst does cause symptoms, you may have:

- Pressure.
- Bloating.
- Swelling.
- Pain in the lower abdomen on the side of the cyst. This pain may be sharp or dull and may come and go.

If you have more severe symptoms like sharp pain with nausea and vomiting, see a doctor right away.

Q: How are ovarian cysts found?

A: If you have symptoms of ovarian cysts, your doctor may do a pelvic exam to feel for swelling of a cyst on your ovary.

If a cyst is found, your doctor will either watch and wait or order tests to help plan treatment.

Tests include:

- Ultrasound, which uses sound waves to create images of the body. With ultrasound, your doctor can see where and how big the cyst is.
- Pregnancy test to rule out pregnancy.
- Hormone level tests to see whether there are hormone-related problems.

- Blood test. If you are past menopause, your doctor may give you a test to measure the amount of cancer-antigen 125 (CA-125) in your blood. The amount of CA-125 is higher with ovarian cancer. In premenopausal women, many other illnesses or diseases besides cancer can cause higher levels of CA-125.

Q: How are cysts treated?

A: Your doctor may want to perform surgery to remove the cyst if you are past menopause or if your cyst doesn't go away, gets larger, looks odd, or causes pain.

For more information...

on ovarian cysts, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, HHS
800-370-2943 (TDD: 888-320-6942) • www.nichd.nih.gov

American Academy of Family Physicians
800-274-2237 • familydoctor.org

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
800-673-8444 • www.acog.org

This fact sheet was reviewed by: Cheryl B. Iglesia, M.D., FACOG, Professor, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Georgetown University School of Medicine; Director, Female Pelvic Medicine and Reconstructive Surgery, MedStar Washington Hospital Center; Food and Drug Administration Advisory Committee

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