

# Endometriosis

Endometriosis can be an extremely painful condition, and it affects approximately 1 in 10 women in North America. It occurs when the type of tissue lining the uterus (endometrium) grows in other areas of the body. These growths in the ovaries, fallopian tubes, and bowels respond to women's hormonal cycles in the same way as the endometrium in the uterus: they shed with each menstruation. Unlike the menstrual fluid in the uterus, the fluid from endometrial growths has no outlet, so it can cause pain, internal bleeding, scar tissue, and other complications. Endometriosis can appear in women from the time they begin to menstruate until menopause. Endometriosis is chronic, which means that many women with the condition will suffer from it for as long as they have menstrual periods, and sometimes even after they have reached menopause.

## What causes endometriosis?

There is no consensus within the medical community about what causes the condition. Some of the theories include:

- genetic predisposition to endometriosis, as it is more common in women who have other female family members with the condition
- retrograde menstruation (menstrual fluid backing into the fallopian tubes)
- environmental toxins consumed through our food
- problems with the immune system

Women who start menstruating at an early age and have short and heavy cycles tend to have an increased risk for developing endometriosis.

## How do I know if I have it?

The symptoms of endometriosis can include:

- painful periods and cramps
- heavy or irregular bleeding
- stomach problems, including diarrhea, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome
- yeast infections
- pain during sexual activity
- problems with fertility

It is possible to have no symptoms, but still have endometriosis. If you suspect that you may have endometriosis (or any other condition which is causing you pain and preventing you from being active) please see a doctor! The Vancouver Women's Health Collective can help you find a suitable physician.

***Please copy and distribute freely to women you know and work with.***



The VWHC's *Titbits* are not intended to endorse or recommend particular treatments, explanations or products but rather to facilitate your own search for health resources. Please see your health practitioner for more information.

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**Titbits...** on women's health

## How is it diagnosed?

Endometriosis is usually diagnosed with a laparoscopy. This involves filling the abdomen with carbon dioxide and surgically inserting a tube so that a specialist can look for possible endometrial tissue, remove samples, and examine it. Often this procedure will take place after a doctor has diagnosed possible endometrial growths during a pelvic exam. A laparoscopy can cause significant pain, and may require several days recovery.

## Is it curable?

Endometriosis has no outright cure. Medical treatments include drugs to regulate the hormonal cycles, pain control medication, and surgery to remove the growths or the reproductive organs themselves. Pregnancy and breastfeeding can temporarily relieve endometriosis, as the menstrual cycle ceases during this time. Diet and lifestyle changes can improve symptoms. There are many complementary treatments that can be considered along with the medical options, such as Chinese medicine or homeopathy.

## Check out these resources at the VWHC

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective maintains extensive information on a variety of health issues and conditions in our Health Files. You can find the endometriosis files in the Vaginal and Uterine Health section. We also have several books and a video in our library specifically about endometriosis. Some excellent reference books with information on the condition (for example, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*) and other books which address various treatment options (such as hysterectomies) can also be found at the VWHC.

## Support Groups

Support groups are places where women can share and discuss their feelings, symptoms, and coping mechanisms. Check out the Vancouver Endometriosis Support Group at [www.endo.bc.ca](http://www.endo.bc.ca) for information on their monthly meetings. You can also look for online discussion groups about the condition.

## Websites worth visiting

VWHC – [www.womenshealthcollective.ca](http://www.womenshealthcollective.ca)  
The Endometriosis Association – [www.endometriosisassn.org](http://www.endometriosisassn.org)  
Endometriosis Resolved - [www.endo-resolved.com](http://www.endo-resolved.com)  
Women's Health Matters - [www.womenshealthmatters.ca](http://www.womenshealthmatters.ca)

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