

## What is an ectopic pregnancy?

The term 'ectopic' means 'in the wrong place'. An ectopic pregnancy occurs when a fertilised egg settles in a location other than the uterus, often in the fallopian tube. This can be caused by a blockage in the tube, or failure of tiny hairs in the tube to sweep the fertilised egg on its way.

Although the egg is fertilised, an ectopic pregnancy is not capable of survival as the fallopian tube cannot accommodate a growing embryo.

In Australia approximately one per cent of all pregnancies are ectopic.

## Who is at risk of an ectopic pregnancy?

If you are sexually active and of childbearing age you have a risk of ectopic pregnancy. Factors that may increase your risk of an ectopic pregnancy include:

- Previous pelvic inflammatory disease
- History of fertility treatments
- A previous ectopic pregnancy
- Any operations involving the fallopian tubes
- Endometriosis
- Smoking

## Symptoms of ectopic pregnancy can include:

- Pregnancy symptoms such as a missed period, morning sickness and breast tenderness
- Pain in the lower abdomen or lower back
- Cramps on one side of the pelvis
- Shoulder tip pain
- Vaginal bleeding or spotting

- If the fallopian tube ruptures: sudden severe abdominal pain; dizziness and or collapse can occur rapidly.

## How is an ectopic pregnancy diagnosed?

- A positive pregnancy test
- Pelvic examination
- Ultrasound scan

*Further investigation depends on the woman's symptoms, the scan findings and the pregnancy hormone level ( $\beta$ HCG).*

## How is an ectopic pregnancy treated?

The treatment for ectopic pregnancy depends on how severe your symptoms are, how advanced your pregnancy is, and whether or not your fallopian tube has ruptured.

### Expectant management

Some ectopic pregnancies don't need to be treated because the pregnancy ends by itself. If you don't have any symptoms, or your symptoms are only mild, you may be given the option of not having any treatment. Instead your doctor will want to monitor you closely using blood tests and further ultrasound scans.

### Medical management (Methotrexate)

- Methotrexate is a drug that disrupts the pregnancy and causes it to end
- The medication is given by injection
- Blood tests are used to follow your pregnancy hormone levels until negative, to determine if medication has worked
- You must wait three months before trying to fall pregnant again

## ▪ **Surgical management**

You may need surgery to remove your ectopic pregnancy if:

- Medical treatment hasn't worked
- Your pregnancy is quite advanced
- Your fallopian tube has ruptured

You may have keyhole surgery (laparoscopy) or open surgery (laparotomy). Your surgeon may remove the pregnancy by using a device to aspirate (suck) the ectopic tissue out of the fallopian tube. Alternatively the surgeon may remove part or all of the fallopian tube.

## **Emotional support**

When your pregnancy ends early and unexpectedly, you may experience a wide range of emotions. Feelings of intense grief, loneliness, disbelief and anger are common reactions to the loss of your pregnancy. It's important that you have the support and understanding you need to get through this difficult time. Family is very important at this time. Also your health professional or hospital can link you to counsellors and other support agencies experienced in helping women and their partners deal with the loss of a pregnancy

## **On discharge after surgery**

- You will receive a discharge summary and information should you need to follow-up with your GP for removal of stitches in the week following your surgery

- We will provide you with contact phone numbers for services if you want to seek ongoing support and/or counselling
- You may experience some vaginal spotting or light bleeding after your procedure-this should settle within seven to 10 days
- Your doctor will discuss options of mild pain relief appropriate for you to take, after you are discharged if needed
- You will have a follow-up appointment in Gynaecology Outpatient clinic in six weeks to discuss future options for pregnancy or contraception.

**Make an urgent appointment with your GP or go to your local Emergency Department if you develop any of the following signs and symptoms of infection:**

- Fever
- Increased abdominal pain
- Redness, heat, discharge or swelling at wound site/sites
- Offensive vaginal discharge.



*Consumer reviewed resource*