



Ovarian Cysts and Masses

What are ovarian cysts?

Ovarian cysts are very common and there are many different types.

Some are normal and are called *physiologic cysts*. These cysts are small pockets of fluid inside the ovary that form naturally during the menstrual cycle. Hormones signal your ovaries to develop follicles, release eggs, and to make estrogen and other hormones. All these normal activities of the ovary can cause cysts. These types of cysts can sometimes cause pain, but usually go away by themselves over time.

Other types of cysts can be very large, have multiple pockets, or contain different tissue types such as hair, bone, and fluid (these cysts are called *dermoid cysts* or *teratomas*). Other cysts may contain additional solid and cystic components and are called cystadenomas. These may require surgery for removal. The good news is that the vast majority of ovarian cysts and masses in adolescents and young adults are benign (non-cancerous).

What are the symptoms of ovarian cysts?

Sometimes ovarian cysts cause symptoms and sometimes they do not. Some people may experience pain or cramping in their lower abdomen. Pain may come and go. Some cysts may burst open and cause bleeding, but this is not likely. Bleeding or twisting of the cyst may cause pain. If a cyst is very large, you might be able to feel a lump in the lower abdomen.

How are ovarian cysts diagnosed?

Cysts are usually found when a person feels pain in their lower abdomen and an ultrasound is ordered. The ultrasound images may show a cyst on the ovary. Less often, an ovarian cyst might be found during a physical exam if it is large enough to be felt or it causes pain during the exam.

How are ovarian cysts treated?

Treatment depends on the type of ovarian cyst.

Physiologic cysts usually disappear after a few weeks. Pain medications such as naproxen, ibuprofen and acetaminophen may help with pain. Your healthcare provider may recommend using hormonal medications to control your cycles and prevent new cysts from forming.

Other cysts that are very large, do not go away, contain solid tissue, or are causing severe pain may need to be removed with surgery. If surgery is needed, most of the time the cyst can be removed without removing the ovary.

After ovarian cysts are treated, will they come back? Will they cause problems later?

Physiologic cysts will come back because they are part of the normal menstrual cycle. Usually, however, these cysts do not cause pain or discomfort. If these cysts do come back and cause pain, using hormonal medications may help prevent the cysts from coming back.

If you have a cyst that is surgically removed, there is a chance the cyst could come back, or a new cyst could grow. Talk to your healthcare provider to see if they recommend using ultrasound to check for new cysts. Fortunately, most cysts do not cause problems in the future.

Sometimes an ultrasound shows many follicles in the ovaries (which give the ovaries a “cystic” appearance). In this case, you may be diagnosed with “Polycystic Ovaries” or “PCOS”. It is important to know that PCOS does not cause pain or large cysts that could rupture or bleed. If you have PCOS, you should discuss how this may affect your ability to get pregnant in the future, as well as your risk for diabetes and high cholesterol.