

# Ectopic pregnancy

## Information for women and their partners

We are sorry that you were found to have an ectopic pregnancy today. This booklet explains the causes of this type of pregnancy and how it may affect your health. If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to speak to the doctors or nurses caring for you.

### Confirming your identity

Before you have a treatment or procedure, our staff will ask you your name and date of birth and check your ID band. If you do not have an ID band we will also ask you to confirm your address. If we do not ask these questions, then please ask us to check.

[www.kch.nhs.uk](http://www.kch.nhs.uk)

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### What is an ectopic pregnancy?

It is a pregnancy which implants outside of your womb (uterus), usually in one of your fallopian tubes. About 2% of all pregnancies are ectopic.

In a normal pregnancy, the fertilised egg travels along your fallopian tube and into your womb. It usually implants in your womb six to seven days after conception.

In an ectopic pregnancy, the fertilised egg does not reach your womb in time and implants in one of your fallopian tubes.

Unfortunately, once this has happened, it cannot move into your womb. The baby does not usually grow normally or develop a heartbeat. It is like a miscarriage that happens in your fallopian tube.

## What causes an ectopic pregnancy?

In many cases there is no obvious cause and it is likely that the pregnancy has implanted outside of your womb by chance.

But there are several risk factors which increase your chance of having an ectopic pregnancy.

- **Pelvic infection** – If you have had a pelvic infection you have a higher risk of ectopic pregnancy. It can cause scar tissue (adhesions) to form within your pelvis. This can damage your fallopian tubes and increase the risk of a pregnancy implanting there. Sometimes you may not know that you have had an infection until you have an operation to remove your ectopic pregnancy.
- **Previous abdominal surgery** – Operations on your abdomen, such as having your appendix out or an ovarian cyst removed, tend to form scar tissue in a similar way to a pelvic infection, so they may increase your chance of having an ectopic pregnancy.
- **Age** – You are more likely to have an ectopic pregnancy the older you are. The risk rises from 1.4% of all pregnancies at the age of 21 to 6.9% at the age of 44. The reason for this rise is not clear.
- **Previous ectopic pregnancy** – If you have had an ectopic pregnancy before, you have about a 1 in 10 chance of having another one.

## Will an ectopic pregnancy cause any serious health problems?

In most cases, you will not have any serious health problems and you will not need any medical help. But an ectopic pregnancy can sometimes cause severe abdominal pain and bleeding, which may put your health at serious risk.

**The earlier we diagnose and treat an ectopic pregnancy, the less likely you are to have health problems, including damage to your fallopian tube(s).**

There is a small risk that any surgery or medical treatment you have for an ectopic pregnancy could cause complications which affect your health.

After an ectopic pregnancy you are at a higher risk of having another one and you may have difficulty getting pregnant again.

## Can an ectopic pregnancy result in the birth of a healthy baby?

There are reports of women with undiagnosed ectopic pregnancies having healthy babies. But these cases are extremely rare and most ectopic pregnancies cannot develop beyond a very early stage of pregnancy.

If an ectopic pregnancy keeps growing it is a severe risk to your health. In this situation, the only safe option is to remove it by surgery as soon as possible.

## **What are the symptoms of an ectopic pregnancy?**

It is not usually possible to diagnose an ectopic pregnancy from the symptoms alone. The most common are pain in your abdomen as well as vaginal bleeding or spotting, but you may have none at all in the early stages.

## **How is an ectopic pregnancy diagnosed?**

We usually diagnose it using a transvaginal (internal) ultrasound scan.

Sometimes we cannot see a very small ectopic pregnancy, so we will take a sample of your blood to measure your pregnancy hormones and the ectopic pregnancy may be diagnosed after a period of time.

Occasionally, we only find that you have an ectopic pregnancy during surgery if you have come to the Emergency Department with signs of severe internal bleeding.

### **Consent**

We must by law obtain your written consent to any operation and some other procedures beforehand. Staff will explain the risks, benefits and alternatives before they ask you to sign a consent form. If you are unsure about any aspect of the treatment proposed, please do not hesitate to ask to speak with a senior member of staff again.

## **How are ectopic pregnancies managed?**

To help decide the safest treatment, we will discuss with you your symptoms, hormone levels, scan results and what you would prefer to do.

Your treatment options are:

- 1. Surgical management**
- 2. Expectant management**
- 3. Medical management**

### **1. Surgical management**

This involves having an operation to remove the ectopic pregnancy. It is the most common treatment. You will have a general anaesthetic so you will be completely asleep.

We recommend that you have surgery if:

- we find internal bleeding on your scan
- you have an ectopic pregnancy with a heart beat
- you are in severe pain
- expectant management or medical management fail.

You usually have a type of keyhole surgery called a laparoscopy, which allows you to go home sooner. This is where the surgeon makes a cut close to your belly button through which they will insert a slim probe with a tiny camera on the end. They will also make two small cuts in your lower abdomen through which they will put surgical instruments.

If you have heavy internal bleeding or lots of scar tissue, you may have a type of open surgery called a laparotomy. This is where we make an 'open' cut in your lower abdomen.

- We may remove the affected fallopian tube if the other tube looks healthy. This is called a salpingectomy.
- If the other fallopian tube looks scarred, we will try to remove the ectopic pregnancy only. This is called a salpingotomy.

## **What are the benefits?**

### **Salpingectomy**

- This is the quickest and most effective way of treating ectopic pregnancy.
- There is a 56% fertility rate after surgery.

### **Salpingotomy**

- This saves your affected fallopian tube.
- There is a 61% fertility rate after surgery.

## **What are the risks?**

### **Salpingectomy**

- There is a 5-10% risk of having another ectopic pregnancy.

### **Salpingotomy**

- Sometimes placental tissue can be left behind and you may need more treatment.
- You may have bleeding from your fallopian tube, so you will need to be monitored more closely.
- There is an 8-15% risk of having another ectopic pregnancy.

## **What happens to the pregnancy tissue that is taken out?**

We send it to the laboratory for routine tests to confirm that you had an ectopic pregnancy. We also check it to make sure it is not an unusual type of pregnancy called a molar pregnancy. We then dispose of the tissue respectfully. There are several options available and a doctor will discuss these with you before surgery.

## **2. Expectant management**

This involves monitoring you closely to see if the ectopic pregnancy is a failing pregnancy and will resolve naturally without you needing any treatment. We diagnose a lot of early ectopic pregnancies at King's, so we use this type of management more often than other hospitals. In women under our care, about 20-30% of ectopic pregnancies resolve naturally through expectant management.

If you have mild symptoms or no symptoms at all, and we find no internal bleeding on your scan, we will test your blood to find out how much pregnancy hormone it contains. This tells us how likely your pregnancy is to resolve itself naturally without any treatment.

Generally, the lower the hormone level, the more likely this is to happen.

The blood result is usually available the same day. One of our nurses will phone you with your result if you have gone home.

If your hormone levels are within a safe range, we will offer you expectant management. You will need to return to the unit regularly so we can monitor the hormone levels in your blood.

During expectant management you may also have vaginal bleeding. This is normal and can be a good sign that the pregnancy is resolving.

### **What do changes in my hormone levels mean?**

**If they are going down:** we will continue with expectant management and monitor you until the levels are back to normal. This can take two – six weeks.

Sometimes the levels will rise slowly to start with and then go down after a few days.

**If they are going up:** Unfortunately, expectant management is not always successful. If your pregnancy hormone levels go up or you have pelvic pain, we usually advise you to have surgery.

Sometimes the levels will rise slowly to start with and then go down after a few days.

### **What are the benefits?**

- You do not need surgery.
- You do not need to stay in hospital.
- It does not damage the affected fallopian tube.

### **What are the risks?**

- You may need to have surgery.
- There is a small risk that the ectopic pregnancy can rupture (your fallopian tube splits) or cause internal bleeding, even if your pregnancy hormone levels are going down. So we advise that you stay within easy travelling distance of our EPU or your local hospital until we have confirmed that the pregnancy has resolved and you have had all the follow-up appointments you need.

**If your pain gets worse suddenly, it is very important that you come to our Early Pregnancy Unit (EPU) immediately. If it is out of hours, go to your nearest Emergency Department.**

## **3. Medical management**

This involves injecting you with a drug called methotrexate. This stops placental tissue growing and so stops the ectopic pregnancy developing.

We only advise this treatment in a small number of cases, most often for the rarer types of ectopic pregnancy. We will not offer this option if the diagnosis of an ectopic pregnancy is at all uncertain, because it usually terminates the pregnancy and it can cause serious abnormalities in developing babies.

Before we give you the drug, you will have blood tests to check that you are suitable for this type of treatment. You will also need to come back to the EPU to have blood tests for

two – six weeks afterwards, to check that the treatment has been successful and to monitor any side effects.

### **What are the benefits?**

- You do not need surgery.
- You do not need to stay in hospital.
- It does not damage the affected fallopian tube.

### **What are the risks?**

- The most common side effect of methotrexate is abdominal pain, but it can be difficult to tell whether this is caused by internal bleeding or the drug itself. Please let us know if you have any abdominal pain. If you have pain but are otherwise well, we will do an ultrasound scan to check for internal bleeding. If you have severe pain, please come to our Early Pregnancy Unit (EPU). If it is out of hours, go to your nearest Emergency Department (ED).
- There is a 10% chance that you may still need surgery.
- The drug may cause conjunctivitis, a sore mouth and diarrhoea.
- There is a small risk that the ectopic pregnancy can rupture (your fallopian tube splits), even if your pregnancy hormone levels are going down. So we advise that you stay within easy travelling distance of our EPU or your local hospital until we have confirmed that the pregnancy has resolved and you have had all the follow-up appointments you need.

### **After you have been given methotrexate:**

- stop taking folic acid, and avoid alcohol and sexual intercourse until your blood tests return to normal.
- do not take aspirin or ibuprofen for a week afterwards; it is safe to take paracetamol
- use a reliable method of contraception for three months because there is a small risk that any child conceived during this time will develop abnormally.

### **Where can I get help and support?**

Grieving and depression are common reactions, both for you and your partner. Emotional symptoms can include sadness, distress, anger and guilt. These are normal and tend to ease with time.

If you feel you need support with coming to terms with your loss, our senior nurse can advise you and give you information. We can also arrange for you and your partner to have specialist counselling.

Please contact us if you have any questions about getting help or would like to be referred.

#### **King's College Hospital**

Tel: **020 3299 3168**

#### **Princess Royal University Hospital**

Tel: **01689 865721**

## **Will it affect my fertility?**

Your chance of having a normal pregnancy depends on the condition of your remaining fallopian tube(s) and your age. In general, women who have an ectopic pregnancy have a lower chance of becoming pregnant again, but the majority will conceive and have a successful pregnancy.

If you have surgery, the surgeon will discuss with you the state of your unaffected tube and ovaries. It is reassuring if these all appear normal.

Unfortunately, there is very little that can be done to reverse damage to your fallopian tubes. If this damage is severe, we may talk to you about being referred to a fertility clinic. If you have any queries about referrals for fertility treatment, please ask us or your GP.

## **When can I try for another pregnancy?**

We advise you to wait for your next period before trying again. If you get pregnant before your first period, it should not make you more likely to have another ectopic pregnancy.

You may find you need more time to recover – emotionally and physically. You may also be worried that it will happen again. Although your risk of having another ectopic pregnancy is higher, it is important to remember that many women go on to have normal pregnancies. The best time to start trying again is when you and your partner feel ready.

If you become pregnant again it is very important that you come to the EPU for an early scan as soon as possible. This is to check that the pregnancy has implanted in your womb. If we cannot see the pregnancy on this first scan, we will monitor you closely to check that it is not ectopic.

## **Contraception**

If you need advice on contraception, please see your GP or go to your local family planning clinic.

## **Who can I contact with queries and concerns?**

If you have any queries or concerns during working hours, contact the Early Pregnancy Unit (EPU):

### **King's College Hospital**

Tel: **020 3299 3168** – 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday

### **Princess Royal University Hospital (PRUH)**

Tel: **01689 865721** – 9am- 4pm, Monday to Friday

If you have any urgent queries outside of these hours, contact the gynaecology ward:

Tel: **020 3299 5934** (King's College Hospital)

Tel: **01689 864132** (PRUH)

**In an emergency, please go to your local Emergency Department (ED).**

## **More information**

### **The Ectopic Pregnancy Trust**

Helpline: 020 7733 2653

[www.ectopic.org.uk](http://www.ectopic.org.uk)

### **The Miscarriage Association**

Helpline: 01924 200 799

[www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk](http://www.miscarriageassociation.org.uk)

## **Sharing your information**

We have teamed up with Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals in a partnership known as King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas'. To make sure everyone you meet always has the most up-to-date information about your health, we may share information about you between the hospitals.

## **Care provided by students**

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

## **PALS**

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS:

Tel: **020 3299 3601**      Email **[kch-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.pals@nhs.net)**

You can also contact us by using our online form at **[www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals](http://www.kch.nhs.uk/contact/pals)**

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: **01689 863252** Email: **[kch-tr.palskent@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.palskent@nhs.net)**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact PALS on **020 3299 1844**.