



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ147  
GYNECOLOGIC PROBLEMS

## Endometrial Hyperplasia

- **What is endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **What causes endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **Who is at risk of endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **What are the symptoms of endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **When should I be tested for endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **What tests are used to diagnose endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **What initial treatment is available for endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **If initial treatment does not work, are there other treatments?**
- **How can I reduce the risk of endometrial hyperplasia?**
- **Glossary**

### What is endometrial hyperplasia?

Endometrial hyperplasia is a condition that occurs when the lining of the **uterus** (endometrium) grows too much. It is a benign (not cancer) condition. In some cases, however, it can lead to cancer of the uterus.

### What causes endometrial hyperplasia?

The female **hormones**—**estrogen** and **progesterone**—control the changes in the uterine lining during the menstrual cycle. Estrogen builds up the uterine lining. Progesterone maintains and controls this growth. At the middle of the cycle (about day 14), ovulation occurs (an egg is released from the ovary). If an egg is not fertilized, progesterone levels decrease. This decrease triggers a normal, regular menstrual period.

Estrogen without enough progesterone may cause the lining of the uterus to thicken. This is called endometrial hyperplasia. In some cases of endometrial hyperplasia, the cells of the lining become abnormal. This is called atypical hyperplasia. This condition can lead to cancer of the uterus.

### Who is at risk of endometrial hyperplasia?

Some women are at higher risk of hyperplasia. Those most at risk are women who

- are in the years around **menopause**
- skip menstrual periods or have no periods at all
- are overweight
- have **diabetes**
- have **polycystic ovary syndrome**
- take estrogen without progesterone to replace the estrogen the body is no longer making and to relieve symptoms of menopause

### What are the symptoms of endometrial hyperplasia?

The most common symptom of hyperplasia is abnormal bleeding.

## When should I be tested for endometrial hyperplasia?

If you have abnormal bleeding along with any of the other risk factors, you may need to be tested for endometrial hyperplasia. One or more tests may be required.

## What tests are used to diagnose endometrial hyperplasia?

The following tests may be done to diagnose endometrial hyperplasia:

- **Ultrasound** exam—A small device is placed in your vagina. Ultrasound uses sound waves to make a picture of the uterine lining. Fluid may be placed in your uterus at the same time.
- **Endometrial biopsy**—Endometrial biopsy can be done in a doctor's office. Your doctor puts a narrow tube inside the uterus to take a sample of cells. You may feel some cramping during the test. The cells will be sent to a lab and checked under a microscope. Endometrial biopsy results may detect cancer of the uterus.
- **Dilation and curettage (D&C)**—For D&C, the opening of the uterus is stretched (dilated). A special device called a curette is used to gently loosen and remove a sample of the uterine lining. This tissue then is studied in the lab to check for cancer. You may be given anesthesia to relieve pain. It may be done in an outpatient clinic, doctor's office, or hospital. The D&C may be done with other procedures, such as **hysteroscopy**.
- **Hysteroscopy**—For hysteroscopy, your doctor inserts a slender, telescope-like device into the uterus to look for areas in the lining that may be abnormal. He or she then removes cells from these areas and sends the sample to a lab for testing.

## What initial treatment is available for endometrial hyperplasia?

In most cases, endometrial hyperplasia can be treated with medication that is a form of the hormone progesterone. Taking progesterone will cause the lining to shed and prevent it from building up again. It often will cause vaginal bleeding.

You and your doctor will find a form of progesterone and a dose that is right for you. How much and how long you take progesterone depends on your condition. After you have been taking progesterone, the lining of the uterus may be tested again by endometrial biopsy.

## If initial treatment does not work, are there other treatments?

If the problem persists, more treatment (such as other medication or surgery) may be used. Hysterectomy (surgery to remove the uterus) may be an option if you have completed your family and your biopsy showed cells that could become cancer (atypical hyperplasia). If you wish to have children, other options can be discussed.

## How can I reduce the risk of endometrial hyperplasia?

Women can take steps to reduce the risk of endometrial hyperplasia. These steps can protect women with certain risk factors as well as help keep it from recurring:

- If you take estrogen after menopause, you need to take a form of progesterone to reduce the risk of endometrial hyperplasia and cancer of the uterus.
- If you do not have monthly periods, you may need to take a form of progesterone to help prevent the lining of the uterus from growing too much. Birth control pills (oral contraceptives) contain estrogen along with a form of progesterone. They may help protect against endometrial hyperplasia in women who do not have regular periods.
- If you are overweight, losing weight may help.

## Glossary

**Diabetes:** A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

**Dilation and Curettage (D&C):** A procedure in which the cervix is opened and tissue is gently scraped or suctioned from the inside of the uterus.

**Endometrial Biopsy:** A test in which a small amount of the tissue lining the uterus is removed and examined under a microscope.

**Estrogen:** A female hormone produced in the ovaries that stimulates the growth of the lining of the uterus.

**Hormones:** Substances produced by the body to control the function of various organs.

**Hysteroscopy:** A surgical procedure in which a slender, light-transmitting telescope, the hysteroscope, is used to view the inside of the uterus or perform surgery.

**Menopause:** The process in a woman's life when ovaries stop functioning and menstruation stops.

**Polycystic Ovary Syndrome:** A condition in which increased androgen causes multiple small cysts to persist on the ovaries.

**Progesterone:** A female hormone that is produced in the ovaries and makes the lining of the uterus grow. When progesterone decreases, menstruation occurs.

**Ultrasound:** A test in which sound waves are used to examine internal structures. During pregnancy, it can be used to examine the fetus.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ located in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.

**If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.**

**FAQ147:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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