

WHEN YOU NEED TO SEE YOUR GYNAE – PRONTO!

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ABDOMINAL DISCOMFORT MAY BE A SIGN OF SERIOUS ILLNESSES. HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

BY MELISSA DALY PHOTOGRAPHY BY AIK CHEN

Spotting. Itching. Tenderness. When below-the-belt symptoms crop up, your first impulse is probably to slip into a pair of pajamas and curl up on the couch. Holing away for a night or two is fine, but what if your symptoms last for weeks or even months?

"When it comes to gynaecological issues, many women adopt a grin-and-bear-it mentality," says Dr Fred M. Howard, chief gynaecologist at the Rochester Endometriosis and Pelvic Pain Center in New York. Often, they're simply too embarrassed to tell anyone – even their doctors – about their problems. "But left untreated, some can lead to more serious illnesses," he says. Even when you do see your doctor up, receiving the proper care can be tricky: Many of the symptoms are often vague and can be easily confused with

other conditions. In fact, research reveals that it can take years for physicians to arrive at an accurate diagnosis.

But the sooner you take charge of your health, the sooner you'll feel better. That's why we've asked experts to decipher some down-there symptoms and treatments – so you can get off that couch already!

.....

■ YOU HAVE

Heavy and/or painful periods that last for at least seven days; abdominal pain or fullness.

ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT

Uterine fibroids You may be one of the 40 per cent of women with fibroids, or non-cancerous growths that are usually found on the uterine wall. "Most people think of it as a condition that affects older women," says Dr Bruce McLucas, founder of the Fibroid Treatment Collective at the University of California, Los Angeles. "But the truth is that fibroids are most common among women in their

Left untreated,
abdominal pain
may lead to more
serious illnesses.



30s and 40s.” The majority of these tissue masses measure about 4cm in diameter (picture a golf ball), but some can balloon to the size of a grapefruit.

About 75 per cent of women with fibroids don't experience any problems and, in most cases, won't need treatment. But when symptoms show up, they can be very uncomfortable and affect the quality of your life.

“Heavy bleeding may occur because fibroids distort the uterine wall, causing more of the lining to shed,” says Dr McLucas. In serious cases, this bleeding can lead to anaemia. Fibroids that block the fallopian tubes, womb or birth canal may lead to infertility, miscarriages and premature birth.

What can help The most common treatment for fibroids used to be hysterectomy, a surgery to remove the uterus. But today, there are non-invasive options better suited to your lifestyle and needs.

For example, if you still want to get pregnant, your best choice is to get a myomectomy. This surgical removal of the fibroids is the only treatment that's known to preserve fertility. Don't want any more kids? Consider uterine artery embolisation, or UAE. Doctors inject particles into the arteries leading to the fibroids, blocking blood flow and shrinking them. For symptomatic women who have a few larger fibroids, a newer treatment called magnetic resonance imaging ultrasound may be in order. During the procedure, a doctor zaps growths with a high-intensity ultrasound beam. Fibroids are broken down and reabsorbed by the body; most patients can return to work in a day or two.

■ **YOU HAVE**
Painful intercourse;
severe cramps starting
a week or two before
menstruation; bloating

ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT
Endometriosis “There's a misconception among women, and even some doctors, that it's normal to have extreme discomfort during your period,” says Dr Howard. But severe

cramps may signal endometriosis, a condition in which the endometrium, or tissue that lines the uterus, grows outside of the uterine walls. Although there's no definitive cause, some experts believe that menstrual blood may carry endometrial cells to other sites in the body – most commonly, the ovaries, fallopian tubes or the lining of your pelvis.

During your monthly cycle, hormone fluctuations cause

If you experience frequent abdominal discomfort, do some background research or seek your doctor's advice.



“WOMEN SHOULD DO VAGINAL SELF-EXAMS WITH A MIRROR EVERY THREE MONTHS. IF YOU NOTICE ANYTHING UNUSUAL, CALL YOUR GYNAECOLOGIST.”

the endometrium to thicken, break down, and bleed. But since there's no place for the blood to drain, it becomes trapped, irritating the surrounding tissue. Over time, it can lead to cysts, scarring and infertility.

What can help Taking oral contraceptives continuously (skipping the placebo pills) to stop your period can relieve symptoms, so ask your gynaecologist about taking an extended-cycle brand. Progesterone-only pills are another option, as are prescription drugs called gonadotropin analogs. Both stop the ovaries from producing oestrogen, causing temporary menopause.

If you're trying to have a baby, ask your doctor about surgical removal of the errant tissue; studies show that this procedure decreases pain while increasing your odds of conceiving. “Schedule the surgery about months before you want to become pregnant,” says Dr Howard.

■ YOU HAVE

A frequent need to urinate; pelvic pain

ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT

Interstitial cystitis

You have the telltale signs of a urinary tract infection, yet no amount of antibiotics seems to do any good. Sound familiar? You may be suffering from interstitial cystitis (IC, and also known as painful bladder syndrome). “This condition may be caused by a small hole in the protective lining of the bladder that allows toxic substances in urine to seep out and irritate the outside of the bladder,” says Dr Kristene Whitmore, chief of urology at the Drexel College of Medicine. A urologist can perform a

cytoscopy, a procedure that uses a tiny camera to examine the inside of your bladder for IC-related hemorrhages.

What can help Unfortunately, there's no simple cure for IC; most sufferers try a combination of treatments. Anti-depressants, such as Prozac or Zoloft, can soothe the inflamed bladder wall, while Elmiron – the only oral pill approved for IC – can help it heal. And the latest research shows that the anti-wrinkle treatment Botox is also effective: Two studies found that an injection of this muscle-relaxing filler in the bladder reduced pain and urinary frequency for up to six months. Physical therapy and bio-feedback, in which a computer monitors your vaginal contractions, can help you learn how to relax your vaginal muscles during spasms.

■ YOU HAVE

Vaginal itching; milky discharge; a fishy odour

ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT

Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

One in five women who purchased an over-the-counter yeast infection remedy actually had BV, finds a study from the Medical College of Georgia. Caused by an overgrowth of anaerobic bacteria in the vagina, this condition strikes 3 million women a year. “Having the infection, which weakens your vagina's natural protective barrier, can raise your risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV, chlamydia and gonorrhoea,” says Dr Jeanne Marrazzo, an associate professor of medicine at the University of Washington.

What can help See your gynaecologist, who may prescribe a course of antibiotics.

3 WAYS TO PROTECT YOUR VAGINAL HEALTH

TAKE THESE STEPS TO WARD OFF GYNAECOLOGICAL ISSUES.

● Check yourself

“I encourage women to do vaginal self-exams with a hand mirror every three months,” says Dr Elizabeth Stewart, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Harvard Medical School. “Take note of any bumps; thickened areas; or red, inflamed skin.” Even though these symptoms may not bother you, they could be a sign of a sexually transmitted disease like genital warts, herpes or syphilis. If you notice anything unusual, call your gynaecologist.

● Hit the gym

Regularly working up a sweat can lower your chances of developing fibroids, according to a National Institutes of Health study from the US. Exercise lowers oestrogen levels, a factor in fibroid growth. You'll also have lighter periods, which may protect you from endometriosis. Excessive bleeding may increase the chances that endometrial tissue will spread outside of the uterus.

● Strengthen your pelvic floor

Kegels can help prevent the urinary incontinence brought on by IC. The pelvic floor muscles are the ones you use to stop urinating midstream. Contract for five seconds and relax for five seconds; repeat 30 times a day.