

What women should know about hysterectomy

Each year in Australia thousands of women learn that they may need a hysterectomy – an operation to remove their uterus (or womb). But although this is not an unusual treatment for a number of problems, it's often misunderstood.

Why do women need this operation?

In the years leading up to menopause (when a woman's periods finally stop), some women experience very heavy, often unpredictable bleeding from the vagina. This may be caused by hormonal changes or by fibroids (non cancerous growths in the uterus). Although fibroids often cause no problems at all, they can sometimes cause heavy bleeding, as well as other problems. Less common reasons for hysterectomy include cancer of the uterus, ovaries and cervix.

Does a hysterectomy involve removing the ovaries?

Not always. Ovaries only need removing if they are diseased, or if a woman has reached menopause. Removing them at menopause prevents any future risk of ovarian cancer. For women who have not yet reached menopause, removing ovaries causes a sudden, premature menopause. Younger women who lose their ovaries before menopause should ask their doctor about hormone replacement therapy.

Is hysterectomy the only treatment?

Although hysterectomy is essential for some cancers, it's usually a last resort for problems like heavy bleeding or fibroids. Other options to discuss with your doctor include removing the fibroids, or reducing or preventing bleeding with either hormonal treatments or treatments to remove the lining of the uterus.

How is hysterectomy done?

There are different techniques each with their own advantages and disadvantages. Your doctor can discuss them with you.

- Abdominal hysterectomy – removing the uterus through a horizontal incision just above the pubic area. This operation is always done through the abdomen, and can involve removing the uterus and the cervix. A less common operation, known as a “subtotal” hysterectomy leaves the cervix (narrow end of the uterus closest to the vagina) intact.
- Vaginal hysterectomy – removing the uterus through the vagina. This leaves no visible scar.

What are the effects of hysterectomy?

Removing the uterus means the periods stop and it's impossible to become pregnant. It's not true that hysterectomy causes weight gain or a personality change. However some women, especially younger women, may feel upset about losing their ability to have children. It's also normal for some people to feel “down” after any type of major surgery. Many women find it helps to talk about how they feel to the doctor treating them, or to their GP. You can also visit your nearest women's

health centre, FPA (Family Planning Association) Health clinic or community health centre.

How long does it take to recover?

Abdominal hysterectomy involves about five days in hospital and up to six or eight weeks to fully recover. Vaginal surgery means about two days in hospital and up to four weeks recovery time.

How long before it's okay to have sex again?

Around six to eight weeks. Having a hysterectomy doesn't affect a woman's sexuality or ability to have an orgasm. Women who have had problems with heavy bleeding or discomfort during sex before the surgery may find sex more enjoyable.

What about Pap tests after a hysterectomy?

Women who still have their cervix intact should still have regular Pap tests every two years, or as advised by their doctor. They should also see their doctor if they experience any bleeding.

For more information about hysterectomy, contact your doctor or women's health centre.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.