

Patient information factsheet

Unscheduled or unexpected bleeding while taking hormone replacement therapy

This factsheet contains important information about unscheduled or unexpected bleeding while taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT). We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have. If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact the relevant healthcare professional using the details at the end of this factsheet.

What is unscheduled bleeding?

Unscheduled bleeding (bleeding that is not expected) while taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a common problem. Bleeding within the first six months of starting HRT, or within three months of changing the dose of HRT, is common. However, if bleeding happens after this time, a transvaginal ultrasound scan is recommended.

What is a transvaginal ultrasound scan?

A transvaginal ultrasound scan is a procedure that uses high frequency sound waves to create a picture of the inside of the body. It involves placing a small probe with a rounded end inside the vagina to assess the lining of the uterus (womb) for any abnormalities.

During the scan, the healthcare professional will:

- measure the thickness of the lining of your womb
- look for any ovarian cysts (fluid-filled sacs that develop on the ovaries)

If the lining of my womb is thickened, does it mean I have cancer?

The risk of womb cancer when experiencing bleeding while taking HRT is low (1 in 100). In most cases where the lining of the womb is thickened, this is usually due to:

- menopausal or atrophic changes (thinning and inflammation of the vaginal walls)
- benign polyps (small, non-cancerous lumps that grow from the lining of the womb)
- an overgrowth of cells (hyperplasia)

If the transvaginal ultrasound scan shows that the lining of your womb is thickened, or you have an ovarian cyst or any other mass in the pelvis, you will be referred to the gynaecology rapid access clinic for more tests. This will be within two weeks of your scan.

What will happen at the gynaecology rapid access clinic?

Your gynaecology rapid access clinic appointment will be with a gynaecologist (a doctor specialising in female reproductive organs) or a specialist nurse.

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They will ask questions about:

- your symptoms
- your general health
- previous medical conditions
- what HRT you are taking (please bring a copy of your HRT prescription with you)

The healthcare professional may then offer you an examination and a hysteroscopy.

Having a hysteroscopy

A hysteroscopy is a procedure that looks for any abnormality in the lining of the womb. During a hysteroscopy, a gynaecologist or specialist nurse will insert a thin tube containing a camera into your womb via your cervix to look at the lining of your womb. They will then inject sterile (purified) water through the tube to make it easier to see inside your womb.

Most people cope well with the hysteroscopy without anaesthetic, especially if they have taken paracetamol or ibuprofen an hour before their appointment (always read the instructions included with the medication). However, if you find the procedure painful, it can be done at a later date under general anaesthetic (medicine that sends you to sleep).

In some clinics, the healthcare professional performing the hysteroscopy may offer to remove any polyps they find at the same time. In such cases, you will be offered local anaesthetic injections into your cervix which will help to open your cervix a bit more for the procedure. They may also take a biopsy (a sample) of your womb lining for further testing. This is to be certain that there is no evidence of cancer.

For more information about having a hysteroscopy, please read our 'Having a hysteroscopy as an outpatient' factsheet: www.uhs.nhs.uk/Media/UHS-website-2019/Patientinformation/Womenshealth/Having-a-hysteroscopy-as-an-outpatient-3341-PIL.pdf

For more information about what will happen at your gynaecology rapid access clinic appointment, please read our 'Your referral to the gynaecology rapid access clinic' factsheet: www.uhs.nhs.uk/Media/UHS-website-2019/Patientinformation/Womenshealth/Your-referral-to-the-gynaecology-rapid-access-clinic-3336-PIL.pdf

When will I receive my results?

The results of a biopsy can take a few weeks to come back. Your results will usually be sent to you by letter. If you have not received your results after six weeks, please telephone the gynaecology pathway navigator using the contact details at the end of this factsheet.

What happens if I have a normal lining of the womb, but I am still bleeding?

Before referring you for a transvaginal ultrasound scan, your general practitioner (GP) will have checked for other causes of bleeding, such as an infection.

Bleeding while taking HRT is often caused by an imbalance in the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. Oestrogen helps improve menopausal symptoms. Progesterone helps protect the womb from bleeding and from cancer. Increasing the dose of progesterone or changing to a different type of progesterone may reduce the chances of bleeding. If menopausal symptoms can be managed with a lower dose of oestrogen, this can also reduce the risk of bleeding. Your GP will be able to help with this.

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It is important that you take your HRT medication as advised by your GP. If you miss any doses, this can also trigger bleeding.

If the bleeding carries on after a change in your HRT, please see your GP. They may refer you for more tests, even if your womb lining appears normal on the ultrasound.

Contact us

If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact the relevant healthcare professional below.

If you have been referred to the gynaecology rapid access clinic

Gynaecology pathway navigator

Telephone: **07787 008205** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm)

If the navigator is unable to answer your call, please leave a message with your name, hospital number and a brief reason for your call. They will return your call as soon as possible.

Alternatively, you can call the hysteroscopy and colposcopy department on **023 8120 6034** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4pm).

If you have not been referred to the gynaecology rapid access clinic

If you have any questions or concerns about unscheduled bleeding while you are taking HRT, but you have not been referred to the gynaecology rapid access clinic, contact your GP for advice.

Useful links

Ultrasound scan

This link is all about ultrasound scans, including transvaginal scans:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/ultrasound-scan

Target Ovarian Cancer ultrasound scan video

Although this video is about how a transvaginal scan can help with the diagnosis of ovarian cancer, rather than womb cancer, it does explain what happens when you have a transvaginal scan in a clear and reassuring way: www.youtube.com/watch?v=wABO9Gdu0tg

Hysteroscopy

This link explains what a hysteroscopy is: www.nhs.uk/conditions/hysteroscopy

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**