

A Guide to Vaginal Bleeding in Early Pregnancy

Bleeding in early pregnancy is common and is upsetting. The aim of this leaflet is to answer some questions you might have.

Why am I bleeding?

Bleeding in the early stages of pregnancy is not unusual and does not always mean there is a problem. However, vaginal bleeding can sometimes be a warning sign of early pregnancy complications such as miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy.

Is this a threatened miscarriage?

Any vaginal bleeding in early pregnancy is called a threatened miscarriage. It may be associated with mild period pain. The bleeding can occur at any time after a missed period. It is often noticed when going to the toilet as a smear of pink, brown or red loss on the toilet paper. The amount of bleeding may vary from just spotting, to a gush with clots. The bleeding may happen every day or may be intermittent, sometimes for up to two weeks. Unfortunately, there is nothing that can be done to stop the bleeding, but we understand that you wish to know what is happening as soon as possible.

How will my bleeding be assessed?

The first step involves asking you some detailed questions about your menstrual cycle and timing of your first positive pregnancy test. This is followed by an abdominal and internal examination.

Why am I having blood tests and not a scan?

Occasionally, the only way to be certain of exactly what is happening is to take a blood test and repeat it 48 hours later. This is more likely if the pregnancy is very early (< 6 weeks). If your dates suggest that you are more than six weeks pregnant, you may need to have an ultrasound performed.

Scanning in early pregnancy

Ultrasound in early pregnancy requires significant training and is best performed within a dedicated Early Pregnancy Unit, by trained ultrasonographers. An ultrasound in early pregnancy is usually internal (vaginal) as this gives the best view and is a safe way of seeing the pregnancy in the early stages. An ultrasound scan in early pregnancy can be used to

- check if the pregnancy is in the correct location in the womb
- check if the pregnancy is ongoing (heartbeat present)

It is possible that you may not get a definite diagnosis after one scan and a repeat ultrasound may be necessary.

What are the causes of bleeding in early pregnancy?

There is not always a cause found for vaginal bleeding in early pregnancy and in most cases the pregnancy continues safely.

Some possible causes may be:

- ***The implantation site (an implantation bleed):*** When the placenta (the organ that provides oxygen and nutrients to your growing baby) tries to 'burrow' into the endometrium (lining of the womb). It may cause some blood vessels to bleed.

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- **The cervix (neck of the womb):** During pregnancy the tissues become soft and rich in blood supply, and this may cause bleeding.
- **The vagina:** Thrush, or any other infection may cause bleeding from the inflammation.
- **Haematoma:** An ultrasound scan after 6-7 weeks of pregnancy can tell if the pregnancy is progressing normally. Sometimes, the scan may show a small haematoma (blood clot) around the sac that contains your baby and if this is the case, you may need a re-scan. Alternatively, this may be checked at your booking scan in the antenatal clinic, which is usually around 11-13 weeks of pregnancy.
- **Miscarriage:** Bleeding during early pregnancy can also be a sign of a miscarriage. Other signs may be cramping, abdominal pain and the passage of clots.
- **Ectopic pregnancy:** This is a rare but serious condition in which the fertilised egg implants outside the uterus. Ectopic pregnancy can cause bleeding and abdominal pain.

No cause was found for the bleeding, am I still at risk of miscarriage?

When there is no recognisable cause of bleeding found, a follow up scan is usually not required. It is reassuring when the baby's heartbeat can be seen during the scan, and this means that there is an 85-97% chance that your pregnancy will continue.

What should I do?

There is no treatment to prevent or stop the bleeding. Bed rest is not recommended but, depending upon the type of work you have, you may wish to take some time off whilst you are actively bleeding.

Please do not use tampons; but instead use sanitary towels or panty liners. This way, you will be able to assess the amount of bleeding more easily and reduce the risk of infection.

We advise you to avoid strenuous activity, not to exercise, gentle short walks only, not to swim or have sex until the blood loss has completely stopped.

When can I return to work?

This depends on you and how you feel. We can provide a letter for your employer as necessary.

If you have any questions or worries, please contact Cork University Maternity Hospital

If you were due to be seen at the community early pregnancy unit and there are changes in your symptoms or concerns. It is important to please phone us directly at the CUMH emergency room which is open 24 hours for advice +/-assessment, as it may be more appropriate to look after you in the CUMH.

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| Reception | (021) 4920500 |
| Emergency Room | (021) 4920545 |
| Early Pregnancy Unit | (021) 4927441 |
| Bereavement & Loss Service | (021) 4920500 |
| 2 South Ward | (021) 4920628 |

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