

Understanding Miscarriage

Spotting in early pregnancy is not always a sign that you might have a miscarriage. The chances are about 50% that the bleeding will stop and your pregnancy will continue normally. Your doctor may send you for an ultrasound or other tests—to help find out what may be going on.

Why miscarriage happens

Most miscarriages happen by chance. They are usually due to one-time problems with the genes that prevent the fetus from developing normally. Miscarriage is not caused by bending, stretching, carrying heavy weights, having sex, working long hours, or having an emotional upset.

What to expect if a miscarriage does happen

When a miscarriage occurs, your uterus contracts to expel (push out) the pregnancy tissue. You may notice:

- more severe menstrual-like cramps and pain
- heavier bleeding, which may include small clots (up to the size of walnut)
- passage of the placenta (which may look like blood clots or liver)

These symptoms usually become less severe and disappear within 7 days. To help reduce the pain, your doctor may recommend medications like acetaminophen (Tylenol®), ibuprofen (Advil®) or aspirin with codeine (222®). For the bleeding, use sanitary pads—not tampons.

In most cases, the miscarriage is complete when your symptoms go away. Sometimes, however, part of the pregnancy tissue stays inside the uterus. If this happens, you may need an operation (called a “D&C”) to remove the tissue left behind. Instead of surgery, your doctor may suggest a medication that makes your uterus contract to expel the tissue (like “labour”).

When to contact a doctor

Promptly call your doctor or go to the emergency department if you notice any of these symptoms:

- heavy or prolonged vaginal bleeding (soaking one “maxipad” pad in 10 minutes or less, soaking a pad every hour for more than 6 to 8 hours; passing clots the size of a walnut)
- severe abdominal pain
- a fever or chills
- a bad odour from your vagina

Personal care

After a miscarriage *or* surgery, it is OK to have showers or tub baths. For about two weeks, you should continue to use menstrual pads instead of tampons, and avoid having sex. A tight-fitting bra worn around-the-clock for 1 or 2 days may help reduce breast fullness and tenderness.

It is recommended that you wait for at least one normal period before you try to get pregnant again.

Your emotions

The emotional effects of a miscarriage can include anger and grief. Sadness, difficulty sleeping, and a decreased appetite are common signs of grief, but everyone deals with their feelings differently. Your family or friends may not know how to respond to your loss. But that does not mean that they don't care or that you should try to ignore your feelings.

It may take longer to recover from these effects than from the physical effects, and you may need to find support from people such as your doctor, a counselor, or a support group.

Adapted from:

UNC Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology: 'Dealing with Miscarriage' [patient hand-out] <www.med.unc.edu>
New Zealand <www.miscarriagesupport.org.nz>

