Can ovarian cysts cause infertility?[1]

Dear Alice,

Both me and my husband are at Columbia University. I was recently diagnosed with ovarian functional cysts that are about one inch long each, in both ovaries. We are starting to think about having a baby. Do you think that having those cysts in my ovaries would decrease my chances of becoming pregnant? Thank you very much for your response.

Answer

Dear Reader,

You’re on to something here: some types of ovarian cysts — particularly ones associated with certain conditions, such as endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) — can impact fertility. However, functional ovarian cysts are not typically considered among them. The noted exception is that if these types of cysts grow large enough, they may impact fertility. That said, they are generally regarded as harmless and tend to resolve on their own within a few menstrual cycles. But, as you’re already in the pre-planning phase of pregnancy, it’s wise to consult a medical professional about whether these cysts pose a risk to your fertility in particular (in addition to what you can do to prepare for conception in the near future).

First, a bit more on functional cysts: prior to ovulation, the ovaries develop cyst-like structures, called follicles that produce hormones (estrogen and progesterone) and release the egg from the ovary. Though these structures typically come and go each month, sometimes they continue growing in size — resulting in a functional cyst. There are two types of these cysts: follicular cyst (when the follicle does not rupture or release the egg and instead grows larger) or a corpus luteum cyst (that occurs when a ruptured follicle closes back up and accumulates fluid). Most functional cyst are about 2/3 of an inch in length, but a few can be upwards of two inches. These cysts are common, generally considered benign, and often resolve on their own in a matter of days or months.

What’s more, many folks with functional ovarian cysts do not experience symptoms. For those that do have symptoms, they can include:

- Changes in the menstrual cycle or spotting between periods
Pelvic pain or ache, especially during penetrative sex
Feelings of nausea, vomiting, or fever (which may be indicative of an infection)

Because these symptoms can also be the sign of a more serious health issue, it's wise to seek medical advice on any abdominal pain (sudden or prolonged) or changes in menstruation to rule out conditions that require treatment or further evaluation. That said, most functional ovarian cysts disappear with no treatment at all. In your case, since your cysts are smaller than two inches each, your health care provider may opt to monitor them periodically via ultrasound for the time being. If they become larger over time, they may talk to you about treatment options, including surgery.

There aren't any prevention measures that are recommended when it comes to ovarian cysts, but you're wise to ask questions and consider what they might mean for your own health. And, while the type of cyst you've been diagnosed with is unlikely to hinder fertility, your health care provider will have more specific insight and what, if any, impact it might have on your pregnancy planning.

Alice!

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