

## ENDOMETRIOSIS: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION OF THE SILENT DISEASE

**Author's Name:** Dr Pandit Rahul Nivrutti<sup>1</sup>, Neha Pandey<sup>2</sup>, Nagarjuna Pitty<sup>3</sup>,  
Saroj Rani<sup>4</sup>, Prof. Dr Vikas Kumar Gautam<sup>5</sup>, J Geetha Emmiammal<sup>6</sup>

### Affiliation:

1. Associate Professor, Pemraj Sarda College, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India.  
raakpandit.73@gmail.com
2. Associate Professor, Panna Dhai Maa Subharti Nursing College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India. nehatiwari1010@gmail
3. Principal Research Scientist, Indian Institute of Science Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.  
nagarjuna@iisc.ac.in
4. Associate Professor, Panna Dhai Maa Subharti Nursing College, Swami Vivekananda Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India. sarojkamboj2k3@gmail.com
5. Professor cum Principal, Aadi College of Nursing, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.  
dr.vikasgautam@gmail.com
6. Principal, Bangalore City College of Nursing, Bangalore, Karnataka, India.  
Geetha.suresh.26@gmail.com

**Corresponding Author Name:** Dr Pandit Rahul Nivrutti, raakpandit.73@gmail.com

### ABSTRACT

*Endometriosis, often referred to as the "silent disease," is a complex and enigmatic medical condition that affects millions of individuals, primarily women, around the world. This title, "Endometriosis: An In-Depth Exploration of the Silent Disease," encapsulates the profound mystery and significance of this ailment, emphasizing the need for a thorough examination. Endometriosis is a condition in which tissue resembling the lining of the uterus grows outside the uterus, commonly within the pelvic region. This abnormal tissue growth can lead to a variety of distressing symptoms, including excruciating pelvic pain, infertility, and in some cases, pain or discomfort in other parts of the body. However, the term "silent disease" is used because these symptoms often remain concealed, overlooked, or misdiagnosed for extended periods.*



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*Endometriosis is a complex and often debilitating medical condition affecting millions of women worldwide. It is characterized by the presence of endometrial-like tissue outside the uterus, leading to symptoms like chronic pelvic pain, dysmenorrhea, dyspareunia, and infertility. The management of endometriosis requires a multidisciplinary approach, with nursing playing a crucial role in providing holistic care, education, and support to patients.*

**Keywords: Endometrium, Lifestyle, Symptom, Pain, Hormonal Therapy, Infertility.**

## INTRODUCTION

Endometriosis is a condition where tissue resembling the uterine lining grows outside the uterus, often causing significant pelvic pain and potentially affecting fertility. This condition can manifest from a person's first menstruation and persist until menopause. In endometriosis, tissue akin to the uterine lining develops outside the uterus, leading to inflammation and the formation of scar tissue within the pelvic region and occasionally in other areas of the body. The exact cause of endometriosis remains unknown, and there are no known preventive measures. While there is no cure for endometriosis, its symptoms can be managed with medications or, in some instances, through surgical procedures. It results in a persistent inflammatory response that may lead to the development of scar tissue, known as adhesions or fibrosis, within the pelvis and other body regions. Endometriosis is a condition characterized by inflammation and the presence of tissue resembling the uterine lining outside the uterus, often associated with pelvic pain and potential fertility issues. This condition typically exhibits three primary manifestations:

**Superficial peritoneal lesions:** These are endometrial-like lesions found on the peritoneum, which can extend up to 5 mm beneath the peritoneal surface.

**Ovarian endometriomas:** These are cystic masses formed by the growth of endometrial tissue within the ovaries.

**Deep infiltrating endometriosis:** These lesions penetrate tissue deeper than 5 mm below the peritoneal surface, affecting structures like the uterosacral ligaments or infiltrating the muscularis propria of nearby organs such as the bladder, intestine, or ureter.

Though uncommon, endometriosis can also manifest outside the pelvic region, affecting areas like the pleura, diaphragm, or umbilicus. The clinical presentation of women with endometriosis varies widely, with some individuals showing no symptoms, while others experience chronic pelvic pain, dysmenorrhea, dyspareunia, and dyschezia. Symptoms tend to follow a cyclic pattern, worsening during menstruation and improving during periods of anovulation, like pregnancy, lactation, menopause, or hormone-induced amenorrhea. Endometriosis can significantly impact female fertility, and some women may first seek medical attention due to difficulty conceiving. It is estimated to affect around 10–15% of women of reproductive age, with a higher prevalence among those experiencing reduced fertility (up to 50%) and chronic pelvic pain (70–90%). The peak incidence of endometriosis is typically observed in women aged 25–35 years, while it is less common in younger females and post-menopausal women. Endometriosis is exceptionally rare in males, usually associated with high-dose estrogen use.

## **FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH ENDOMETRIOSIS RISK**

Several factors are associated with an increased risk of developing endometriosis. These factors include having a first-degree female relative (such as a mother or sister) who has endometriosis. Having a shorter-than-normal menstrual cycle (less than 27 days). Experiencing longer-than-normal menstruation lasting more than five days. Having a low body mass index (BMI). Beginning menstruation at an early age (early menarche). Never having been pregnant (nulliparity). Müllerian anomalies, which refer to abnormal anatomical development during the formation of female reproductive organs. The presence of outflow obstructions, like cervical stenosis, a transverse vaginal septum, or an imperforate hymen. These factors contribute to the risk of developing endometriosis, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of this condition.

The exact cause of endometriosis remains a mystery, and its underlying pathology is not thoroughly comprehended. One proposed mechanism is the concept of retrograde menstruation, where menstrual fluid backflows through the fallopian tubes and into the peritoneal cavity. In this scenario, endometrial cells are believed to accompany the fluid, possibly utilizing the lymphatic and vascular network to transport themselves. These cells then settle in various tissues, giving rise to endometriotic lesions and endometriomas. This process can result in internal bleeding and inflammation, leading to the development of fibrosis and adhesions, ultimately contributing to the symptoms and physical distortion of pelvic anatomy observed in more severe cases of endometriosis. However, it's important to note that retrograde menstruation occurs in approximately 90% of women, while only a small portion of them will go on to develop endometriosis. This suggests that other factors, such as hormonal, inflammatory, or immunologic elements, may play a role in determining whether lesions implant and persist in the pelvic cavity. There are also alternative theories regarding the origin of endometriosis lesions, including the possibility that they arise from Müllerian remnants that did not properly differentiate or migrate during fetal development, or from circulating blood cells that transform into tissue resembling the endometrium.

## **SYMPTOMS OF ENDOMETRIOSIS**

Endometriosis is often linked with a range of symptoms, including persistent pelvic pain, both cyclical and non-cyclical, discomfort during menstruation, painful sexual intercourse, and pain when defecating or urinating. Like many other chronic pain conditions, women living with

endometriosis frequently report experiencing fatigue and depression. Additionally, individuals with endometriosis have a notably higher rate of subfertility compared to the general female population. Interestingly, when assessing disease stage according to ASRM criteria, the abundance, location, and type of lesions show consistently weak correlations with the pain symptoms reported by patients. Understanding the natural progression of the disease remains a challenge, and there is no consensus on whether superficial peritoneal endometriosis can evolve into another subtype or spontaneously regress. The causes of extra-pelvic endometriosis are even more uncertain. Given these uncertainties, there is a growing suggestion that we could make greater strides in developing patient-centered treatments by reframing how we view endometriosis. Instead of treating it as a single "disease" diagnosed solely based on the presence of lesions resembling endometrial tissue, it's proposed to be more beneficial to consider endometriosis as a "syndrome." In this context, a diagnosis is made when a patient exhibits both visible lesions and related symptoms. This shift in perspective places a stronger emphasis on assessing new therapies within a framework that prioritizes addressing the symptoms most significant to the patient, recognizing that these symptoms can vary across the various stages of a person's life.

Symptoms of endometriosis are generally non-specific and commonly observed. Approximately one-third of women with endometriosis may not experience any symptoms. Among those who do, the most frequent presentation is cyclical pelvic pain. Additional prevalent symptoms include: Severe dysmenorrhea, Lower abdominal or back pain, Pain during sexual intercourse (dyspareunia), Painful urination (dysuria), Pain during bowel movements (dyschezia), Visceral pain during physical activities, Heavy menstrual bleeding or pre-menstrual spotting, which could also indicate the presence of co-existing adenomyosis, Abdominal bloating, Persistent fatigue, Constipation, Impaired fertility. In rare instances, endometriotic lesions may manifest outside the abdominal cavity, such as in the lungs, leading to pain and other symptoms, like pneumothorax or haemoptysis, synchronized with the menstrual cycle. Bowel obstruction due to endometriotic adhesions is another potential complication. Acute episodes of intensified pain, fever, or, very rarely, ascites, can occur as a result of chemical peritonitis following the leakage of blood from an endometrioma.

### **MEDICAL MANAGEMENT OF ENDOMETRIOSIS**

In the medical management of endometriosis, the primary objective is to effectively control symptoms, either as a standalone approach or in conjunction with surgical interventions. This

medical management encompasses a range of treatments, both hormonal and non-hormonal. Hormonal therapy, in particular, operates by suppressing the activity of endometriotic lesions, with optimal effectiveness achieved when it induces amenorrhea through the down-regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis. It's worth noting, however, that hormonal treatment may not necessarily halt the progression of the disease, and there are situations where specific hormonal therapies are not advisable, such as in cases involving a current or recent history of breast cancer or a history of liver tumors. Endometriosis is characterized as a chronic and frequently recurrent condition, often necessitating long-term treatment. Discontinuing medical management can result in the recurrence of symptoms, with approximately 50% of women experiencing this within five years of treatment cessation. Typically, the onset of menopause leads to a complete cessation of symptoms, even when menopausal hormone therapy is employed. Nevertheless, there have been rare instances of symptom recurrence in a small number of cases.

### **Hormonal Treatment**

For individuals with endometriosis who do not have immediate plans for pregnancy, the initial step in their treatment typically involves the use of hormonal medication, with the option of adding pain-relieving analgesics if necessary. Progestogen-only therapy, which can be in the form of a progestogen-only oral contraceptive or a progestin, is the recommended first-line treatment for suspected or confirmed endometriosis (various options are available). In cases where progestogen-only treatment is not well-tolerated or suitable, an alternative first-line treatment involves combined estrogen and progestogen therapy, such as a combined oral contraceptive (COC) (various options are available). Additional hormonal treatment options encompass gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) analogues like goserelin, leuprorelin, and busarelin, as well as androgenic medications like danazol. These are used to induce a state of lowered estrogen levels. However, the use of GnRH analogues is typically reserved as a second-line option due to their adverse effects, and they are more commonly administered in a secondary care setting. Androgenic medications are now infrequently used due to their adverse effects. GnRH analogues come with several short-term adverse effects, primarily related to the decrease in estrogen levels, leading to symptoms similar to menopause, a decrease in libido, and emotional instability. Long-term adverse effects include a decrease in bone mineral density. To mitigate these side effects, "add-back" therapy with estrogen and progestogen is recommended if GnRH analogues are continued for more than six months.

## **Pain Management**

For alleviating endometriosis-related pain, it is advisable to use a short-term treatment, typically around three months, with a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) or paracetamol, as needed. These pain relievers can be employed either alone or in combination and can complement other medical (hormonal) or surgical management approaches. NSAIDs, in particular, may be effective in reducing pain and inflammation associated with endometriosis, although the available evidence from clinical trials is limited and inconclusive. Regular and prolonged use of opioids is discouraged due to the associated risks of long-term treatment, such as the potential for dependence and exacerbation of gastrointestinal symptoms. If pain remains uncontrolled, and a neuropathic element is suspected, it might be worthwhile to consider a trial of a neuromodulator, like amitriptyline or gabapentin, even though their use for this purpose is not officially approved. However, it's important to note that there is limited evidence of their effectiveness, and their clinical utility is hindered by adverse effects. Short-term cyclical dosing to coincide with the menstrual cycle is unlikely to be beneficial. In addition to pharmacological approaches, it's recommended to explore non-pharmacological strategies to manage pain and other symptoms, including maintaining a healthy diet, regular exercise, adequate sleep, transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), pain psychology, and referrals to specialist women's health physiotherapy. If primary care interventions fail to adequately manage pain, even after trying both pharmacological and non-pharmacological methods, it may be prudent to seek advice from a pain clinic.

## **SURGICAL MEDICAL MANAGEMENT OF ENDOMETRIOSIS**

Surgery can be an effective approach to alleviate pain and other symptoms of endometriosis, and it may enhance fertility in women experiencing reduced fertility. Nevertheless, even after surgical procedures, there is a notable risk of endometriosis recurrence, with 20–40% of women experiencing symptom recurrence within five years, although these rates may vary based on the specific subtype of endometriosis. Utilizing hormonal treatment, such as levonorgestrel-IUS, following surgery can help mitigate the risk of recurrence and the need for additional surgical interventions. The success of surgical treatment for endometriosis hinges on several factors, including the severity of the condition, its location, the nature of the symptoms, and the age of the patient. Surgical interventions tend to be more effective in older women, likely due to the natural decline in estrogen production. Surgical treatment for endometriosis encompasses two primary strategies. The first, known as conservative surgery, involves laparoscopy with the goal



of ideally excising all visible lesions and restoring pelvic anatomy. This is the more common surgical option and substantially reduces pain in the majority of patients while preserving, and in some cases, improving fertility. However, it is associated with a higher rate of symptom recurrence compared to more aggressive, non-preservative techniques. Nevertheless, for many women, the ability to maintain fertility outweighs this consideration. Extensive surgical procedures are typically reserved for women with endometriosis who no longer desire to conceive and have exhausted all available medical treatment options. Frequently, conservative surgery will have been attempted previously. More aggressive surgical alternatives include procedures like hysterectomy, bilateral salpingectomy (the removal of fallopian tubes), and bilateral oophorectomy (the removal of ovaries). The gold standard approach involves removing all visible peritoneal lesions, typically in conjunction with a hysterectomy. Patients considering radical surgery should be provided with counseling regarding the potential for persisting symptoms, even after undergoing a complete bilateral oophorectomy and hysterectomy. It's also important to discuss the adverse effects associated with entering menopause prematurely. Menopausal hormone therapy can be employed to manage the symptoms of menopause in such cases. In general, it is preferable to conserve normal ovaries whenever possible. It's worth noting that endometriosis is associated with a slight increase in the risk of ovarian cancer. Therefore, for individuals who do not wish to conceive, bilateral salpingectomy can be offered as an option to reduce this risk by approximately 30-60%.

### **VITAL ROLE OF NURSES IN MANAGING ENDOMETRIOSIS**

Nurses are at the forefront of educating patients about endometriosis. They play a pivotal role in raising awareness and dispelling myths surrounding the condition. Many women with endometriosis experience delays in diagnosis due to a lack of knowledge about the disease. Nurses can provide information about symptoms, risk factors, and the importance of early diagnosis, empowering patients to seek timely medical attention. Furthermore, nurses can educate patients about treatment options, both medical and surgical, and help them make informed decisions about their care. They can clarify the benefits and potential side effects of different treatments, allowing patients to participate actively in their healthcare decisions. Endometriosis often presents with a range of distressing symptoms, including pain, fatigue, and emotional distress. Nurses are well-equipped to provide comprehensive symptom management strategies. They can guide patients in pain assessment and monitor the effectiveness of prescribed medications, adjusting treatment plans when necessary. Additionally, nurses can



teach patients coping techniques, such as relaxation exercises and mindfulness, to help them manage the emotional and psychological challenges associated with chronic pain and fertility concerns. They can also collaborate with other healthcare providers to ensure a holistic approach to pain management. Endometriosis can significantly impact a patient's quality of life, often leading to feelings of isolation and frustration. Nurses can serve as empathetic and understanding advocates, offering emotional support and a listening ear. They can create a safe space for patients to express their concerns, fears, and frustrations, and provide reassurance that they are not alone in their struggle. Furthermore, nurses can advocate for patients within the healthcare system, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are met. They can help patients navigate the complex healthcare system and collaborate with other healthcare professionals to ensure comprehensive care and prompt referrals to specialists when required. Infertility is a common concern for women with endometriosis. Nurses can offer fertility counseling, addressing the emotional and practical aspects of fertility preservation. They can discuss fertility preservation options, such as oocyte cryopreservation, and provide guidance on family planning and assisted reproductive technologies. Nurses can also offer emotional support during fertility treatments and assist in the coordination of care with reproductive endocrinologists and fertility specialists, helping patients navigate the challenges and uncertainties associated with fertility issues. Endometriosis is a chronic condition that often requires ongoing management. Nurses play a pivotal role in long-term follow-up care. They can monitor patients' responses to treatment, assess for potential complications or side effects, and provide continuous support and education throughout the patient's journey. Nursing plays a vital and multifaceted role in managing endometriosis. Nurses are instrumental in educating and raising awareness, managing symptoms, providing emotional support, and advocating for patients within the healthcare system. Their contributions are indispensable in enhancing the overall well-being and quality of life for women living with endometriosis. As part of a multidisciplinary healthcare team, nurses provide compassionate and patient-centered care, addressing the physical, emotional, and psychological aspects of this challenging condition.

## **SUMMARY**

Ensuring that women who are suspected of having endometriosis feel heard and acknowledged is a critical responsibility of primary care providers. Oftentimes, these patients have endured symptoms of endometriosis for an extended period, possibly even regarding them as "normal" or feeling dismissed when they did seek assistance. Recognizing the profound impact of



endometriosis on a patient's quality of life and offering psychological support, including referrals when needed, should be a central focus for primary care clinicians as they explore management strategies. Additionally, obtaining a comprehensive clinical history and ruling out other potential diagnoses as much as possible is essential. In short we should focus on Obtaining a detailed clinical history and work to rule out other potential diagnoses. Perform an abdominal examination and, if appropriate, conduct a bimanual vaginal examination. If any abnormalities are detected during the examination, request a pelvic ultrasound and make a referral to a gynecologist. If there is suspicion of endometriosis, initiate the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) taken on an as-needed basis, along with a hormonal medication (e.g., progestin-only pill or combined oral contraceptive). Consider alternative progestogens but titrate the dosage to prevent adverse effects. Refer women who intend to conceive to a gynecologist. Ideally, every patient with suspected endometriosis should undergo a pelvic ultrasound, including a transvaginal scan if they provide consent.

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