

# Miscarriage

A healthy pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks. When a woman loses a developing baby before 20 weeks of pregnancy, this is called **miscarriage**. The medical term for miscarriage is **spontaneous abortion**. Many miscarriages happen before a woman knows she is pregnant. As many as 20% of recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage. Most miscarriages are not preventable. They are usually related to genetic problems of the **fetus** (the developing baby) or to the mother's health.

The October 16, 2002, issue of *JAMA* includes a study reporting that low levels of **folate** (a B vitamin) in the mother may increase the risk for miscarriage.

## SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS OF MISCARRIAGE

- Vaginal bleeding or spotting
- Fluid draining from the vagina (without pain)
- Abdominal pain or cramping
- Passage of tissue from the vagina

## MATERNAL RISK FACTORS

- Problems with the **cervix** (bottom portion of the uterus) causing it to become **incompetent** (loose)
- Smoking
- Illegal drug use
- Heavy alcohol use
- Chronic disease
- Infection
- Older age

Most miscarriages happen because the fertilized egg in the uterus does not develop normally. This is related to the genetic material (**genes** and **chromosomes**) of the fetus. Exercise or sexual intercourse during pregnancy does not cause miscarriage.

## REPEATED MISCARRIAGE

Some women have 2 or more miscarriages. This is called **repeated miscarriage**. Women who have repeated miscarriage may still be able to have a healthy baby. Certain medical problems increase a woman's chances of miscarriage. Tests for such conditions may be ordered, as well as blood tests to look for hormone imbalance.

Treatment of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, may help a woman's chances of having a healthy baby after repeated miscarriage. It is important for a woman who has had repeated miscarriage to plan her next pregnancy, control chronic medical problems, and seek early prenatal care.

If an incompetent cervix is thought to be responsible for repeated miscarriage, there is treatment available. A minor surgery called a **cerclage** (placing a stitch around the cervix to help keep it closed for the entire pregnancy) may help some women who have had repeated miscarriage.

Other things women can do to increase their chances of having a healthy pregnancy are to quit smoking, stop using illegal drugs, and abstain from using alcohol. Women should make sure they have adequate nutrition, including recommended doses of vitamins and minerals. Consultation with an obstetrician (a physician who specializes in care of women and their pregnancies) is important for women who have repeated miscarriage.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org)
- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development  
800/370-2943  
[www.nichd.nih.gov](http://www.nichd.nih.gov)
- Medem  
[www.medem.com](http://www.medem.com)

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Source: American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

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