

Banishing Uterine Fibroids

For millions of American women, uterine fibroids are a painful reality.

Growing in the muscle of the uterus, these noncancerous tumors can cause a wide range of debilitating symptoms, ranging from pelvic pain and pressure to heavy periods.

The most common treatment for this condition is a hysterectomy—a major operation that entails the surgical removal of the uterus. In fact, two-thirds of the 600,000 hysterectomies performed each year in the United States are done to eradicate uterine fibroids. However, other procedures are available, says **Dr. Scott Goodwin**, chairman of the Department of Radiological Sciences at University of California, Irvine.

Sparing the uterus. Several years ago, Goodwin pioneered a uterus-sparing, minimally invasive method to eliminate uterine fibroids. Known as uterine artery embolization (UAE), this approach is considered a major advance in women's gynecological care. The procedure is performed in a radiology suite at UC Irvine Medical Center in Orange, rather than an operating room, and the patient is conscious but sedated for comfort's sake. First, a tiny incision is made in the patient's groin. Then, under high-definition X-ray guidance, an interventional radiologist passes a narrow tube through the incision directly to the arteries that supply blood to the fibroids. FDA-approved microscopic spheres are released into the blood vessel, forming a barricade. This cuts off the blood supply to the fibroids, causing them to shrink.

Patients remain in the hospital overnight to receive pain medication for cramping, which often follows the procedure. Most return to everyday activities within a week or two. "On average, the fibroids become 50 to 75 percent smaller in about six months," says Goodwin. Studies show that



more than 90 percent of women who have UAE experience significant or total relief from heavy bleeding, pain and other symptoms.

Compared with alternative treatments for fibroid tumors, UAE offers many benefits. Unlike a hysterectomy, this method of eliminating fibroids involves no blood loss, incisions, stitches, scars, general anesthesia or lengthy hospital stay.

Furthermore, UAE requires only about a week or two off from work, versus six weeks or more for a hysterectomy. Because UAE doesn't usually trigger premature menopausal symptoms, it's also more patient-friendly than hormone therapy, which is sometimes used to shrink uterine fibroids. Additionally, UAE doesn't involve destroying the lining of the uterus to control bleeding—a technique used in another common

Several years ago, a UC Irvine doctor pioneered a uterus-sparing, minimally invasive procedure to eliminate uterine fibroids. Today, it is considered a major gynecological advance. fibroid treatment called endometrial ablation. And because UAE allows all fibroids to be eliminated at the same time regardless of size or location, it's more efficient than a myomectomy, in which surgeons remove individual growths through the vagina or an incision. But Goodwin points out that a myomectomy remains the treatment of choice for women who may wish to become pregnant after treatment. "There are many reports of patients getting pregnant following UAE," he says. "However, studies are still necessary to confirm this."

The right treatment. To determine the best treatment for women with uterine fibroids, interventional radiologists rely on MRI and ultrasound. These two tests confirm the presence and location of the tumors, while ruling out other diseases that can cause fibroid-like symptoms. "Although a hysterectomy may still be necessary to eliminate fibroids in some cases, we've made important progress in providing uterus-saving options for women," says Goodwin.

For referral to a UC Irvine Healthcare women's health specialist, call 714.456.2911.