

SUFFERING IN SILENCE

OVER A MILLION WOMEN IN THE UK SUFFER FROM ENDOMETRIOSIS, BUT MANY FEEL EMBARRASSED TO SPEAK OUT ABOUT THE CRIPPLING CONDITION...

Described by sufferers as 'isolating, debilitating and restrictive', and with no known cure, endometriosis affects 1.5 million women in the UK. Yet the condition is often treated as taboo.

Emma Bunton, Louise Redknapp and Anthea Turner have spoken candidly about their own experiences with the disorder in an attempt to encourage others to seek help – despite this, many women still feel too embarrassed to mention their symptoms to their boss, friends and family.

In support of Endometriosis Awareness Week, from March 2 to 8, here's what every woman should know...

WHAT IS ENDOMETRIOSIS?

It's when endometrial tissue – which usually lines the womb – grows outside it. Mrs Caroline Overton, lead surgeon and consultant gynaecologist at St Michael's University Hospital and its Endometriosis Centre in Bristol, explains more: 'Patches called endometriosis lesions cause inflammation and damage, and are commonly found on the ovaries and pelvis, but can also appear elsewhere, such as on the bowel or bladder.'

WHO CAN GET IT?

Any woman of childbearing age. Symptoms typically appear when periods start as a teenager.

WHAT CAN CAUSE IT?

No one knows the exact cause, but it is linked to the hormone cycle. The endometrial cells act just like the lining of the uterus – each month they multiply and swell, then break down ready to be shed. However, unlike the cells in the uterus that leave the body as a period, this tissue has no way to escape, causing pain.



WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Your periods can be heavy and painful, with the pain starting several days earlier. Sex can be painful too and it can hurt going to the toilet. Living with the pain can be exhausting. Mrs Overton adds: 'If you're having to miss work or school, stop exercising and are planning your life around your periods, then your periods aren't normal.'

IS IT A MODERN CONDITION?

No. The ancient Greeks described it as 'the wandering womb'. It's also not an infection, not contagious and not cancer.

WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS?

Scar tissue can develop, which in severe cases causes internal organs to fuse together. Up to 30 to 40 per cent of sufferers can struggle to have children without medical help.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

A thin viewing tube is passed through a small incision in the abdomen under a general anaesthetic.

CAN IT BE TREATED?

There's no cure for endometriosis, but painkillers can help you cope better with the symptoms, and hormone treatments can reduce oestrogen production. Lesions can be cut out or burned away during laparoscopy.

WHERE'S THE BEST PLACE TO GET ADVICE?

Make an appointment with your GP and keep a 'symptoms' diary. You can also visit www.endometriosis-uk.org for support and tips. **OK!**

FEATURE BY MICHELLE GARNETT PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE BENETT, FAME FLYNET, GETTY IMAGES, PA, REX, WENN



Above: Louise Redknapp was diagnosed with endometriosis. Above left: The condition can be very painful