Fibroids are non-cancerous growths that start in the muscle tissue of the uterus. They are very common and present in about one-third of all women between the ages of 40-60. These rates can be 2-3 times higher in Black women, where fibroids are often seen at even younger ages. While fibroids often do not cause any problems, depending on their location they can cause several issues including constipation, pelvic pain, and heavy and prolonged vaginal bleeding (that when severe can cause anemia). So, while these growths do not cause cancer their effects can be potentially serious. This week we discuss fibroids, what is known about their causes and what you can do to try to prevent or limit their growth.

Fibroids: risk factors and the hormone connection

It is known that women who have a family history of fibroids, are overweight or who have never given birth have an increased risk of developing fibroids. High blood pressure has also been associated with fibroids. We cannot change our family history or lose a lot of weight overnight. However, there is growing evidence to suggest that there are things that you can do to that may decrease fibroid growth. The added benefit is that these lifestyle changes will also help support your overall health. Hormone levels (especially estrogen) stimulate fibroid growth. When a woman who has fibroids reaches menopause, her fibroids will generally shrink. Fibroid growth is driven by an imbalance in hormones. Estrogen and progesterone are two main female reproductive hormones, but if they are out of balance this can cause problems. Here are some strategies that will aid in restoring or supporting hormone balance.

Be aware and knowledgeable of what we put in and on our body

Eating a diet high in processed carbohydrates, like chips, crackers, bread, etc. has been associated with increased fibroid growth in African-American women. Part of this may be due to the fact that these foods can increase blood sugar which leads to the release of inflammatory and growth factors in our blood. These factors can stimulate estrogen production. On the positive side, eating a diet higher in vegetables and fruits can lower inflammation, moderate blood sugar and is associated with fewer fibroids.

The role of dairy products in fibroid growth is unclear. One study has shown that African-American women who report consuming more dairy products have a decreased risk of developing fibroids. However, there are hormones that can be given to cows to increase their milk production that increase the hormone levels present in finished milk. To gain the nutritional benefits of dairy products but limit one's exposure to these added hormones choose organic dairy products whenever possible.

In addition to type of food we eat, we need to pay attention to how it is made and the packaging it comes in. Some of the chemicals that are used to produce plastics have been shown to potentially have estrogen-like effects in the body. Ways to decrease your exposure to these environmental hormones include: avoid heating and reheating foods in plastic containers (use glass, ceramic, metal etc.) or if you must use them ensure that they are labeled microwave and dishwasher safe. Ditch your plastic water bottles or get one that is BPA-free or made of metal (BPA is a chemical used to manufacture many plastic bottles canned food liners). Decrease your intake of canned foods (most cans are lined with BPA).

It's not just about food, recent studies have suggested an association between the use of hair

relaxers and fibroids. This does not mean that relaxers cause fibroids, more studies are needed. However, these studies do suggest a relationship that is worth knowing about as we are making personal health and beauty decisions. In addition, as a community we need to pressure the companies whose products we buy to do continued research to ensure the safety of these products.

Other lifestyle issues

Normal vitamin D levels are important for the normal growth of cells and low vitamin D levels are also associated with increased inflammation in the body. Early studies have shown that Vitamin D can limit the growth of fibroid cells in test tubes. So, make sure that you are getting your vitamin D. As we have previously discussed with other health issues, stress management is important. Increased stress levels can drive inflammation which can contribute to hormone imbalances, so seek ways and support to get a handle on stress.

Treatment Options and Supporting your health

For women whose fibroids continue to grow, there are various treatment options both surgical and nonsurgical. If fibroids are small and causing mild to moderate symptoms, it makes sense to try non-surgical treatment options. If these measures fail, surgery is often considered. Surgical procedures include procedures to attempt to just remove the individual fibroids (myomectomy) and complete removal of the uterus (hysterectomy). If you are needing treatment for your fibroids, make sure you know your options. Studies have shown that African-American women have high rates of hysterectomy and that some of this may be due to not always having good information regarding alternatives to surgery. Hysterectomy is a surgical procedure and may be an appropriate choice for many women if other options have failed but make sure that you know about the alternatives before deciding on this.

If you have already had a hysterectomy or other procedure for fibroids, it is never too late to make changes for your health. It should be noted that the same hormone imbalances that can drive fibroid growth can present as wide range of health conditions that affect both men and women: premenstrual syndrome, polycystic ovary disease, obesity, blood sugar problems and mood symptoms. Any of these lifestyle changes discussed will still have benefits to your overall health.

Dr. Winbush is a family physician practicing at NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center. She has a strong interest in wellness and patient education to help individuals feel empowered to optimize their health and functioning. She wants to hear from you! To respond to this article, request topics for future articles and for additional resources visit www.functionwellmedicine.com or LIKE Function Well Medicine on Facebook.

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