

Caroline Cahill, a junior at Willamette University in Salem, Ore., is concerned about her future.

“I don't know many other 20-year-old college students who worry about not being able to have children,” she said.

Cahill has endometriosis, a female health disorder that plagues, according to The Endometriosis Association, an estimated 6 million Americans and many more worldwide. It is characterized by tissue, called the endometrium, being found outside the uterus, normally causing discomfort and preventing many women from conceiving.

Endometriosis takes on a variety of forms that range from imperceptible to excruciating in pain because of the inexact nature of it; the tissue can be found in numerous areas, including the ovaries, fallopian tubes, ligaments that support the uterus and the outer surface of the uterus, the association says.

The condition is difficult to identify early on because its symptoms are so related to normal changes in a woman's body as she grows, the association says. Pains with menstruation, a common indicator of endometriosis, are typically regarded as ordinary until the pains do not stop. By that time, the association says, so many years have passed that the condition becomes extremely difficult to treat.

Treatment options depend heavily on the patient's health and life status, Dr. Elizabeth Buescher who practices at the Stanford University Medical Center, said.

“It depends on the patient's fertility desires,” she said. “You can use birth control pills. We use those and prescribe them continuously, and they help a lot. But when patients want a child, Lupron [Depot] is usually the top option. It puts the patient in a medical menopause. Patients cannot use it for a prolonged amount of time, though.”

Cahill, who is currently on Lupron Depot, learned she was afflicted in August.

“I had surgery to remove an ovarian cyst,” she said. “And my surgeon, who is also my gynecologist, saw the growths and scar tissue that are present when someone is suffering from endometriosis.”

Her doctor prescribed her six months worth of shots of Lupron Depot, a common medication for the condition which lists side effects that include hot flashes, night sweats, weight gain, depression and a loss of sex drive, as well as a host of others.

While Lupron Depot can help rid the body of endometriosis, it can still reappear at any time, Buescher said. And if a woman suffering from the condition manages to have children, she added, endometriosis is a hereditary disease.

Kelly Colman, a 27-year-old Seattle resident, lasted four months with the drug until deciding that the side effects were too severe. In 2009, she had cramps that became increasingly more painful and experienced significant pain during sex.

She was diagnosed with multiple ovarian cysts “the size of a small avocado,” she said.

“A few weeks before my surgery was scheduled, a cyst broke, and that was the first time I ever passed out from pain,” she said.

Colman had laparoscopic surgery to rid her body of the endometriosis, but now worries that the condition is back.

“I can feel that the growths have already returned ... Day to day I am mostly pain-free now, but my sex life will suffer until I can afford another surgery,” she said.

“My whole life became affected by this disease,” she added.

And Cahill’s mind is already consumed by endometriosis.

“I’m 20-years-old,” she said. “I know at 20 I’m technically two years into my legal adult life, but I’m still in college. I still think it’s OK to not know exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life ... I have a hard time keeping that from nagging me most days.”