

PLACENTAL ABRUPTION

What is it?

The placenta is the organ that develops in the womb during pregnancy and nourishes the baby by linking its blood supply to that of the mother. In addition to transferring nutrients from mother to baby, the placenta transfers oxygen into the baby's circulation and also removes waste products.

During pregnancy the placenta normally remains firmly attached to the wall of the womb until after the baby is born. In about 1% of cases, however, it separates before the baby is born. This is known as 'accidental bleeding', 'accidental haemorrhage' or 'placental abruption'.

Placental abruption can happen at any stage of pregnancy, but is more likely from mid-pregnancy onwards. The amount of separation can vary between a small amount of placenta coming away and complete detachment.

Why does it happen?

There is no specific known cause of placental abruption. It can happen as a result of a fall or other accident; it may be associated with high blood pressure or with the mother being in poor health; it may also be connected with smoking or taking illicit drugs. However, in the vast majority of cases, it unfortunately appears to be just a tragic, chance event.

Symptoms

In severe cases there is heavy bleeding from the vagina, although this doesn't always happen as large volumes of blood may be retained in the womb behind the placenta.

There is often continuous pain in the lower abdomen, sometimes accompanied by cramping. The mother may also show signs of shock such as rapid pulse, looking pale, and feeling weak and dizzy.

Any bleeding during pregnancy, especially if accompanied by abdominal pain, should be reported immediately to a doctor so that an examination can take place. This will probably include an ultrasound scan to check whether the placenta has actually separated.

Treatment

Treatment for placental abruption will depend on the severity of the abruption. If only a small amount of the placenta has come away, the baby has a high chance of survival. With more extensive separation the baby will become distressed, while if more than half the placenta comes away the baby may die.

If the bleeding is slight, and the baby's heart rate is normal, a hospital stay of a few days until the bleeding stops may be advised. In cases of severe bleeding, where there are signs that the baby is distressed, the baby will probably be delivered by Caesarean section. If the baby had died, then the health and well-being of the mother will be the primary consideration.

After placental abruption

Unless there is some underlying physical or medical cause for the abruption, which is unlikely, there is no reason why further successful pregnancies should not take place. Physical recovery time will depend to a large extent on the severity of the abruption. If the baby has died as a result of the abruption, then considerable time will also be needed to recover from the initial stages of the emotional impact, and as time goes on. Organisations such as those below can provide understanding and support.

Further information:

Sands (Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Society)

Sands supports anyone affected by the death of a baby, and promotes research to reduce the loss of babies' lives. Support is provided through a Helpline, local groups run by and for bereaved parents, and a range of information resources including publications, leaflets and a website. Sands also works collaboratively with health and social care professionals to enhance the care they offer.

Helpline: 020 7436 5881

Website: www.uk-sands.org

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