Early Pregnancy Concerns: What to Expect and What Happens Next

Provincial Council for Maternal and Child Health

This information is for anyone experiencing early pregnancy concerns, such as pain, bleeding or uncertainty. The early pregnancy period (within the first 13 weeks) can be stressful and unpredictable, especially when symptoms change or answers aren't clear right away. This resource explains where to go for care, when to get help and what follow-up often looks like if you live in Ontario.

When to Get Help Right Away

Call 911 or go to the Emergency Department if you have:

- Heavy vaginal bleeding (e.g., soaking more than 1 pad per hour or passing large clots)
- Severe abdominal or pelvic pain (e.g., sharp, persistent, one-sided or getting worse)
- Fainting or feeling faint, especially if sudden, recurrent, with bleeding or pain
- Shoulder tip pain
- Severe dizziness or a fast heartbeat
- Fever over 38°C (100.4°F) or chills, especially with abdominal pain or bleeding
- Severe vomiting or inability to keep fluids down
- Signs of shock (clammy skin, confusion or shallow breathing)
- A history of ectopic pregnancy or fertility treatment with new pain or bleeding

Helpful tip:

- If you're unsure where your closest Emergency Department is, visit Find a service – Health811
- Bring your health card (i.e., OHIP), if you have one, and any recent test results if available

When to Seek Medical Care Same Day or Next Day

Contact a healthcare provider if you have:

- Mild to moderate cramping or abdominal discomfort that is not getting worse
- Light spotting, especially after sexual intercourse or pelvic exam
- Nausea and vomiting that is manageable, without signs of dehydration (e.g., extreme thirst, very dry mouth, dizziness or unable to keep fluids down)
- A positive pregnancy test and you're unsure about symptoms
- Vaginal discharge with strong or unpleasant (foul) smell. This may indicate an infection and should be checked.
- You're worried something may be wrong

You can contact:

- Your primary care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner)
- Your midwife or obstetrician/gynecologist
- A walk-in clinic, an urgent care centre or Health811
- The Emergency Department if the above are not available or accessible to you

Helpful tip:

If you need more specialized care (for pain, bleeding, or unclear results), ask about an **Early Pregnancy Assessment Clinic (EPAC)**.

These clinics provide coordinated testing and follow-up and are available in some cities across the province.

- Your doctor, midwife or the Emergency Department can refer you.
- Bring your health card (i.e., OHIP), if you have one, and any recent test results if available.



What Will Happen at Your Visit

Your care team may:

- Ask about your pregnancy dates and symptoms
- Do a physical exam if needed
- Arrange blood tests (pregnancy hormone – β-hCG)
- Arrange an ultrasound to check the pregnancy

You may need more than one blood test or ultrasound for a clear answer. This is very common in early pregnancy.

Helpful tip:

Ask if your clinic offers on-site ultrasound or if you need to book separately.



What Happens Next

In early pregnancy, it often takes time to understand what's happening. One visit or test is not always enough.

Your care team may recommend:

- Repeat blood tests over a few days
- A follow-up ultrasound after time has passed
- Ongoing monitoring of your symptoms
- Follow-up with your doctor, midwife, an EPAC, or an OB/GYN

Terms You May Hear While Receiving Care During Early Pregnancy

Your healthcare team may use certain medical terms when talking about blood tests or ultrasound results. These words are meant to guide your care and follow-up. They do not always mean a final diagnosis (a label for what is wrong).

Ectopic pregnancy
This means a pregnancy is growing outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube. This is rare but serious and needs urgent medical care.

Helpful tip: If you hear this term or have symptoms (e.g., worsening pain, dizziness or shoulder pain), go to the Emergency Department immediately. Bring your health card (i.e., OHIP), if you have one, and any recent test results if available.

Pregnancy loss (miscarriage)
This means the pregnancy is no longer developing, usually occurring in the first trimester. If this happens, your provider will talk with you about next steps and offer support.

Helpful tip: Ask where follow-up will happen (family doctor, EPAC or hospital). If you need emotional support, request a referral to Pregnancy and Infant Loss (PAIL) Network or local counselling.

Pregnancy of unknown location (PUL)
This means a pregnancy test is positive but no pregnancy is seen yet on ultrasound. This can happen in early pregnancy (< 6 weeks) and usually requires follow-up testing.

Helpful tip: Ask your provider if you should return to the same clinic or an EPAC for follow-up.

Uncertain viability
This means a pregnancy is in the uterus (correct location), but it is too early to know if it is developing normally.

Helpful tip: Your care team will likely book another ultrasound in 7 to 14 days. Confirm if this will be at the same clinic or a hospital imaging department.

Support That May Be Helpful

You may find the following information helpful.

- **Indigenous supports**
  If you are First Nations, Inuit or Métis, ask about Indigenous Patient Navigators or Indigenous-led supports at your hospital, clinic or from your community. They can help coordinate care and cultural supports.

- **No Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) coverage**
  You can and should still seek care if needed. Ask the clinic about options and costs, or call Health811 (dial 811 or visit health811.ontario.ca) for advice on where to go.

- **Language and accessibility**
  You can request an interpreter, accessibility supports and/or bring a support person. Ask about these when booking or at check-in.

- **If something feels wrong**
  It's okay to return for care or ask questions about your plan. If symptoms worsen, go to the Emergency Department.

- **Pregnancy concerns and loss support**
  Ask your provider for a referral to Pregnancy and Infant Loss (PAIL) Network, or complete a Request for Support form. Visit Pregnancy and Infant Loss (PAIL) Network or PregnancyED for additional information.

- **Mental health and safety**
  If you feel overwhelmed or unsafe:

  - **Mental health helpline (Ontario)**: 1-866-531-2600 (available 24/7) or visit connexontario.ca.
  - **9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline:** call or text 9-8-8
  - **Hope for Wellness Helpline:** 1-855-242-3310 (available 24/7) or visit hopeforwellness.ca – supports First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.

This resource is available in other languages. Scan the QR code to see them.

This resource is for general information only and does not replace medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.