

Photodynamic endometrial ablation

Understanding NICE guidance –
information for people considering the
procedure, and for the public

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National Institute for Clinical Excellence

MidCity Place
71 High Holborn
London
WC1V 6NA

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About this information

This information describes the guidance that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has issued to the NHS on a procedure called photodynamic endometrial ablation. It is not a complete description of what is involved in the procedure – the patient’s healthcare team should describe it in detail.

NICE has looked at whether photodynamic endometrial ablation is safe enough and works well enough for it to be used routinely for the treatment of heavy periods (which is known as menorrhagia).

To produce this guidance, NICE has:

- looked at the results of studies on the safety of photodynamic endometrial ablation and how well it works
- asked experts for their opinions
- asked the views of the organisations that speak for the healthcare professionals and the patients and carers who will be affected by this guidance.

This guidance is part of NICE’s work on ‘interventional procedures’ (see ‘Further information’ on page 10).

About photodynamic endometrial ablation

During a period, the tissue that lines the uterus (womb) comes away and is passed through the vagina with some blood. In the interval before the next period, the tissue grows again. If a woman is having heavy periods, one way of reducing the amount of blood and tissue lost is to remove some of the lining tissue of the uterus (which is known as the endometrium).

The standard operation for women with heavy periods has been hysterectomy, which involves removing the woman's uterus in an operation done under general anaesthetic. A woman cannot become pregnant after she has had her uterus removed.

Recently, a number of different techniques for destroying the endometrium using heat have been tried. These include using lasers, microwaves, heated salt water, a heated fluid-filled balloon or an electrical current.

Photodynamic endometrial ablation involves injecting a light-sensitive chemical into the uterus and then 'activating' it using a laser. Once activated, the chemical destroys the endometrium. The chemical is injected through a narrow tube put into the uterus through the woman's vagina and cervix. The laser device is put into place in the same way. The procedure is often carried out using a local anaesthetic.

How well it works

What the studies said

There was only one published report of this procedure. This described what happened in two women with heavy periods and in one postmenopausal woman who had had bleeding for a long time. This was not enough for NICE to reach a conclusion about how well the procedure worked.

What the experts said

The experts thought that the procedure was still experimental and that it wasn't ready to be used routinely.

Risks and possible problems

What the studies said

The report that NICE found did not include any details about problems such as pain during the procedure.

What the experts said

The experts said that there was a possibility that the chemical used in the procedure may affect the skin, making it sensitive to sunlight. But in general, they could not say how safe the procedure was because there was so little information on problems that happened.

What has NICE decided?

NICE has decided that, if a doctor wants to carry out photodynamic endometrial ablation, it should be done only as part of a research study that has been approved by a research ethics committee. A research ethics committee is a body that exists to protect the safety and well-being of anyone who is taking part in, or may take part in, a research study.

What the decision means for you

Your doctor may have offered you photodynamic endometrial ablation. NICE has considered this procedure because it is relatively new. NICE has decided that there are uncertainties about the benefits and risks of photodynamic endometrial ablation. Because of these, NICE has recommended that photodynamic endometrial ablation should be carried out only as part of an approved research study. Your doctor should explain the aim of the study and what is involved before you decide whether to take part.

Further information

You have the right to be fully informed and to share in decision-making about the treatment you receive. You may want to discuss this guidance with the doctors and nurses looking after you.

You can visit the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) for further information about the National Institute for Clinical Excellence and the Interventional Procedures Programme. A copy of the full guidance on photodynamic endometrial ablation is on the NICE website (www.nice.org.uk/IPG047guidance), or you can order a copy from the website or by telephoning the NHS Response Line on 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference number N0484. The evidence that NICE considered in developing this guidance is also available from the NICE website.

NICE has also issued guidance on similar techniques for treating heavy periods. These are:

- microwave endometrial ablation (www.nice.org.uk/IPG007guidance)
- balloon thermal endometrial ablation (www.nice.org.uk/IPG006guidance)
- free fluid endometrial ablation (www.nice.org.uk/IPG051guidance).

If you want more information on heavy periods, a good starting point is NHS Direct (telephone 0845 4647) or NHS Direct Online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk).

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71 High Holborn
London
WC1V 6NA

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