

# Placental metastases

*Patient Information Series – What you should know. what you should ask.*

## **What is a placental metastasis?**

Metastasis is the term used when a cancer has spread to another organ. When it has spread to the placenta, it is called placental metastasis. If there is more than one area that is involved, they are called placental metastases. If this occurs, it is considered an advanced stage of cancer.

## **How does placental metastasis happen?**

Many cancers spread in the body through blood flow when cancer cells become detached from the main tumour and are carried through blood to another organ. It is possible for a cancer to come from mom or baby and spread to the placenta.

Normally, the placenta serves as a very good barrier to unhealthy or dangerous substances in blood, and blocks these from entering the baby from mom's blood. This means that if mom has cancer and there are placental metastases, they are usually on "mom's side" of the placenta and have not actually entered the baby's blood. It is extremely rare for cancers to spread through the placenta to the baby's organs or blood.

The reverse is also true. If the fetus has a cancer, and if it spreads to the placenta, it is usually on the "baby's side" of the placenta and has not actually entered mom's blood. It is extremely rare for cancers to spread through the placenta from baby to mom.

## **How will I know if the cancer has spread to the placenta?**

The risk of spread to the placenta is low for most cancers in moms. It is most often reported to happen in certain types of skin, stomach, or lung cancers, but overall it is still unlikely to happen.

You may be having more ultrasounds because of the cancer diagnosis and/or because of the treatments you are receiving. The placenta is examined during ultrasounds, and lesions may be identified in this way before the baby is born. However, it is uncommon to have a metastasis large enough to see on ultrasound.

After the pregnancy, the placenta will be sent for microscopic analysis to determine if there was spread of the cancer to the placenta.

If it is the fetus that has a cancer, this may be suspected by a mass in the fetus. Placental metastases from fetal cancers usually do not appear as masses in the placenta. More often, the placenta appears bulky and pale.

## **What does it mean for the pregnancy if there is a placental metastasis found?**

If there is a mass in the placenta found on ultrasound, it will be examined closely to determine what it may be. In a pregnant person who is not known to have cancer, it would be extremely unlikely for it to be a placental metastasis. In a person who does have cancer, it is a possibility. It would be monitored closely with more ultrasounds during the pregnancy. It is not possible to

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make a certain diagnosis of placental metastasis before the end of the pregnancy. A certain diagnosis can only be made on microscopic analysis after the placenta is removed.

Your obstetrician and oncologist may discuss the possibility of a placental metastasis if a mass is found in the placenta. Further details should be discussed with your physicians.

## **What other questions should I ask my physicians?**

- How does this change my cancer stage?
- How will treatment (with chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery) change if this is a placental metastasis?
- When should the baby be delivered?
- Where should I deliver?

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