

HEALTH ALLIES

UTERINE FIBROIDS

WHY DOES AWARENESS MATTER?

By Fibroid Institute Dallas

It's an epidemic that is often overlooked and underfunded. In the United States, an estimated 26 million women between the ages of 15 and 50 have uterine fibroids, and more than 15 million women suffer from life-altering symptoms.

The problem is that many women don't know what fibroids are or how their lives can be dramatically affected by them, and fibroids are typically the source of an array of symptoms that can easily be confused with or blamed as "typical women's health issues," says Dr. Suzanne Slonim, founder and medical director of Fibroid Institute Dallas. In many cases, women will simply suffer in silence and normalize their symptoms when early intervention can make a difference. It's clear that raising awareness and identifying resources to address this critical health issue is extremely impactful to the lives of many women.

Dr. Slonim is passionate about helping women and stepped beyond her facility to bring this important topic to the doorstep of legislators in Texas. Thanks to the time and efforts of many individuals, State Representative Senfronia Thompson presented legislation with two bills. H.B. 1966 designates July as Uterine Fibroid Awareness Month, while H.B. 1967 creates an information and research database of women with uterine fibroids. On September 1, 2021, both Texas House bills were signed. Texas became the ninth state to officially designate Uterine Fibroid Awareness Month, with the city of Dallas and Dallas County following suit soon after.

According to the Uterine Fibroid Research and Education Act of 2020, lack of patient and provider awareness around less-invasive alternatives to hysterectomies lead to an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 unnecessary hysterectomies annually. Fibroids are non-cancerous tumors in the uterus that affect up to 70% of white women and more than 80% of African American women. They cause symptoms like heavy bleeding, pelvic pressure, back or leg pain, abdominal bloating or swelling, urinary frequency, constipation, and pain during intercourse.

"It's hard to have this conversation without mentioning the health disparities that exist in this country," says Dr. Slonim. Black women are diagnosed younger, between 29 and 39, and often have multiple and larger fibroids. Their fibroids tend to grow faster and cause

more severe symptoms. According to the Black Women's Health Imperative, the rate of hospitalization for fibroids is three times higher for Black women than white women. They are also two to three times more likely to undergo a hysterectomy and seven times more likely to have a myomectomy. In these surgeries, complications and blood transfusions are more common than in white women. Moreover, a Black woman's mortality rate has been researched and proven to be higher with surgery.

Unfortunately, 41 percent of all women reported seeing two or more providers before receiving a diagnosis of fibroids, and most are told about invasive surgical options first, such as hysterectomy. Hysterectomy is the second most common surgery among women of reproductive age in the U.S.

Fibroid Institute is a practice that focuses solely on treating uterine fibroids without surgery. Our physicians are interventional radiologists. "Treatment is primarily in our office, which is much more comfortable for our patients. We have all the equipment we need to maintain the highest safety standard, but we can personalize care." Uterine fibroid embolization (UFE) involves feeding a tiny tube through the blood vessels to the fibroids and blocking their blood supply from the inside. This causes the fibroids to die and shrink, and it resolves the symptoms. Dr. Slonim continues, "Fibroid Institute has a well-developed pain management protocol, and each patient has our physician's cell phone number. Patients go home the same day and have a short recovery period of about a week."

Because of the reluctance of some gynecologists to refer a patient to an interventional radiologist for a UFE evaluation, many patients will switch to a different gynecologist. Dr. Slonim established Fibroid Institute out of concern for high incidences of surgery to treat fibroids and the need for educating women about treatment options. When Fibroid Institute Dallas opened its doors in 2016, it was a slow start. Only six gynecologists



sent patients to see if they were candidates for the UFE procedure. We treated 47 patients that first year. "As Fibroid Institute Dallas has grown, I've met many gynecologists who have the same philosophy, and we've developed a wonderful, collaborative approach to treating fibroids," Dr. Slonim says. Each doctor has specialized experience. Bringing interventional radiology and gynecology together as a team leads to high-quality care and improved patient satisfaction.

This approach allows us to now work with over 300 gynecologists and help hundreds of women each year. This increased awareness has led to growth and expansion. In September 2021, Dr. Slonim welcomed partner Uma Reddy, MD. "Since UFE is the only procedure we perform, we can completely focus all our energy on refining the technique and the patients' experience," Dr. Reddy adds.

The impact fibroids have on a woman's quality of life and the under-discussed emotional toll on well-being, self-esteem, and overall body positivity can sometimes feel worse than the physical suffering. Fibroid Institute believes it's crucial to bring the impact of fibroids into the spotlight. Dr. Slonim shares, "Our mission is to empower and educate women to identify the best fibroid treatment for themselves. A lot of women don't want invasive surgery or don't want to lose their uterus. They just want to live without symptoms and be fibroid free. This is the force behind fibroid awareness and our fibroid-free movement." **DMJ**