

Doctors say the rise in fibroid cases is influenced by a combination of factors including genetics, hormonal imbalance, delayed childbirth, and lifestyle changes.

BY OLIVIER MUKAAYA & PHOEBE MASONGOLE

Many women are silently battling uterine fibroids, non-cancerous growths in the uterus that can cause heavy bleeding, pelvic pain, swelling, and even fertility problems in the Bugisu Sub-region.

For instance, a 37-year-old Mukyaye first felt a sharp cramp in her lower abdomen, and she dismissed it as a normal menstrual issue.

She was in her late 20s, living in Bugema B, Mbale City, and like many women, she believed painful periods were something to persevere through, no question. But the discomfort soon grew into something more alarming.

"One day, I started having very painful cramps and heavy bleeding. I thought it was normal, but it kept happening every month," she says.

Over time, the symptoms intensified. After getting married, she hoped the situation would improve, but her health only worsened.

She began fainting during her periods, and the bleeding became heavier and more irregular.

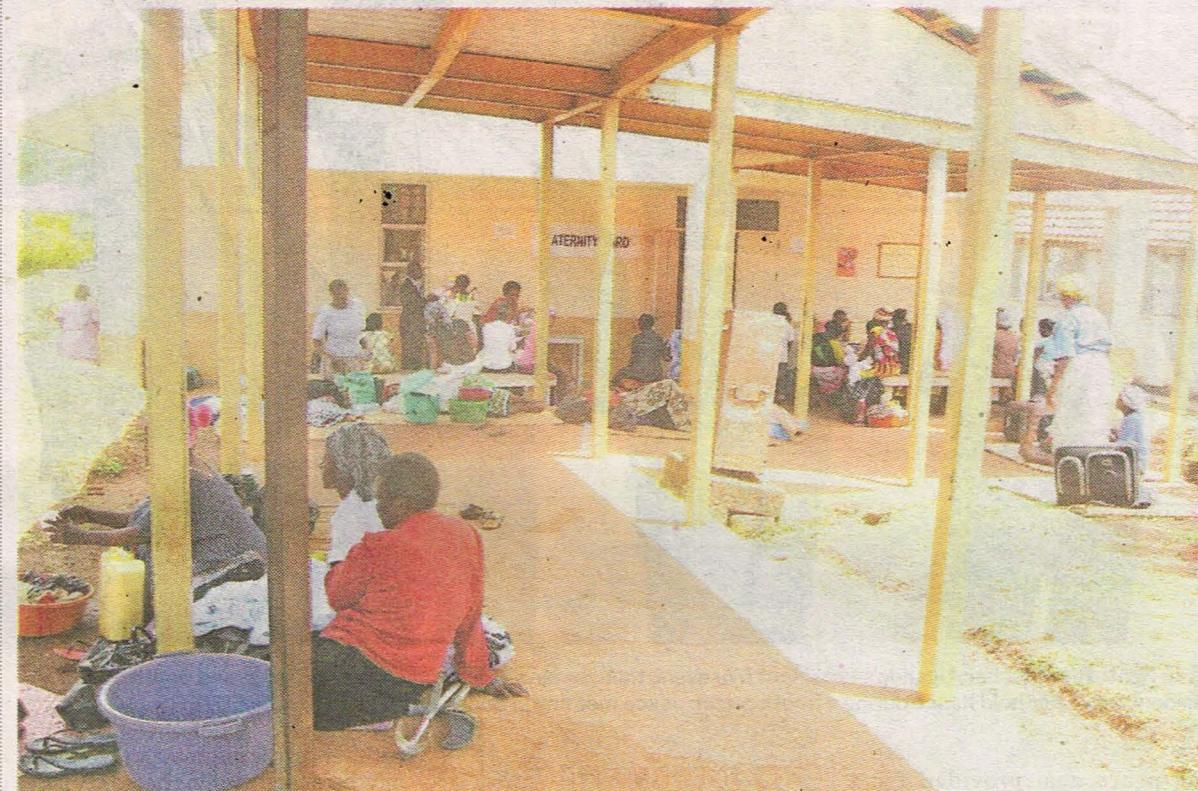
"My husband took me to the hospital, and the doctors told me I had large fibroids that needed surgery," she says. "Out of fear, I asked my husband if we could first try herbal medicine."

She used herbal remedies for months. Nothing changed. People in her community told her that getting pregnant would make the fibroids shrink, but despite trying, she did not conceive. The pressure became unbearable, and eventually she agreed to undergo surgery.

Although the procedure was successful, her symptoms gradually returned. The emotional, physical, and financial strain began to spill into her home.

"There came a time when my husband started misbehaving. My periods lasted up to 10 days, and I still wasn't getting pregnant. One morning, he just left. He only sent me a message saying he was tired of my problems. I was so broken," she says.

# Bugisu Sub-region women battle with uterine fibroids



Expectant women and their caretakers sit outside the Maternity Ward at Mbale Referral Hospital. PHOTO/FILE

## FIBROIDS REPORT

According to a 2022 study at Mbarara Regional Referral Hospital in Uganda, about 28.2 percent of women attending the gynaecology clinic were found to have uterine fibroids, that is 90 out of 319 women screened via ultrasound.

Of those diagnosed, around 74 percent reported symptoms such as pelvic pain (72 percent), heavy or irregular menstrual bleeding (63 percent), pelvic mass (22 percent), or difficulty conceiving (10 percent).

tive of fibroids. Many come late, when the fibroids are already large and causing complications," she says.

She adds that one of the biggest challenges is delayed diagnosis due to a lack

of awareness.

For 43-year-old Jessica Apio, life with fibroids was a cycle of fear, exhaustion, and confusion.

Her menstrual periods lasted up to 10 days, accompanied by heavy bleeding and severe pain that radiated from her back into her legs.

A medical examination later revealed a fibroid almost the size of a grapefruit. Her doctor recommended a hysterectomy, the complete removal of the uterus.

"It felt drastic. Losing my uterus felt like losing part of my identity," she recalls. "I was not ready for such a life-changing decision."

Fear made her postpone surgery. She kept going for check-ups, hoping the fibroid would stop growing. During one visit, her doctor cautioned her about the risks of not treating fibroids.

Eventually, she learnt about Uterine Fibroid Embolisation (UFE), a less invasive procedure that shrinks fibroids

without surgery.

"After the treatment, the recovery was so quick. My heavy bleeding reduced immediately, and the back pain disappeared," she says.

Ms Sharon Tuwebaza, 34, a resident of Mbale City, who lived with a fibroid that destabilised her life for years, says she experienced symptoms including frequent urination, backaches, and fatigue. "I went to the bathroom every two hours. I was always tired, and my productivity at work dropped," Ms Tuwebaza, says.

Doctors say the rise in fibroid cases is influenced by a combination of factors including genetics, hormonal imbalance, delayed childbirth, and lifestyle changes.

Despite the growing prevalence of fibroids, awareness remains low. Many women do not know the symptoms, and others rely on misinformation passed down through generations.

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These findings suggest that fibroids are a common and significant health concern for reproductive-age women in Uganda, underscoring the importance of accessible screening, early diagnosis, and proper care for women across different regions.

Dr Samuel Mugabi, a reproductive health specialist, says cultural beliefs often delay treatment.

"Many women are told that fibroids are a normal part of womanhood, or that they will disappear after childbirth," he says.

Cost is another critical barrier. Private hospitals charge between Shs3m and Shs7m for a myomectomy (fibroid removal), depending on complexity. Advanced procedures like UFE are available in a few facilities and can cost even more.