



AMERICAN COLLEGE OF
OBSTETRICIANS AND
GYNECOLOGISTS

Cancer of the Ovary

Cancer of the ovary is a disease that affects one or both ovaries, the two organs on either side of the uterus. Ovaries contain eggs that are released when a woman ovulates. They also produce hormones for reproduction. If cancer of the ovary is found and treated early, the cure rate is good. Patients whose cancer has not spread outside the ovary have a 90-95% chance of living 5 years or longer after treatment.

What Is Cancer?

Normal, healthy cells throughout a person's body grow, divide, and are replaced on a routine basis. Sometimes, cells develop abnormally and begin to grow out of control. When this happens, the cells form growths or tumors.

Tumors can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer). Benign tumors do not spread, or metastasize, to other body tissues. Malignant tumors can invade and destroy nearby healthy tissues and organs.

There are three types of ovarian cancer:

1. Epithelial
2. Germ cell tumors
3. Sex cord-stromal tumors

The type of cancer is based on the type of cells in which it occurs. Epithelial cancers are most common. About 85-90% of all ovarian cancers arise from epithelial cells. These are the cells that cover the surface of the ovaries. Most women who get this type of ovarian cancer are older than 40 years.

Who Is at Risk?

About 3% of all new cancers found in women each year are ovarian cancers. Women of any age can have cancer of the ovary, but the risk increases with age. The most common type occurs most often in women between the ages of 50 and 75 years.

The fewer times a woman ovulates in her lifetime, the lower her risk of cancer of the ovary. Therefore, women who have had children are less likely to get ovarian cancer because they do not ovulate when they are pregnant or breastfeeding. Women who use birth control pills do not ovulate and thus are less likely to get ovarian cancer.

About 5-10% of all ovarian cancers occur in women who have certain genes (BRCA1 and BRCA2) passed on from their parents. Women with the BRCA1 gene have a 45% lifetime risk of getting the disease. Those with the BRCA2 gene have a 25% risk.

Symptoms

The symptoms of cancer of the ovary often are confused with other health problems. In some cases, there are no symptoms. As a result, ovarian cancer is most often first found in advanced stages (after it has spread). About 20% of ovarian cancers are found in early stages (before it has spread).

Screening

A screening test is a test that is done when there are no symptoms or known risk factors present. There is no good test to screen for cancer of the ovary. For this reason, routine testing for ovarian cancer is not recommended.

Treatment

If a woman is thought to have ovarian cancer, surgery is needed. It is best that a doctor specially trained or experienced in cancer surgery, such as a gynecologic oncologist, perform this surgery. The surgeon will explore the extent of the disease, remove the cancer, and decide what other treatment is needed.

After Treatment

Women treated for cancer of the ovary need to have regular checkups. The doctor may perform a pelvic exam, depending on the extent of surgery. Blood tests to check CA 125 levels will likely be done on a routine basis. Other tests, including ultrasound, chest X-ray, or computed tomography, also may be done.

Finally ...

Women should be aware of their risk of ovarian cancer. It is important for women to be alert to changes in their bodies and to discuss them with a doctor. If you are concerned about cancer of the ovary, talk to your doctor.

This excerpt from ACOG's Patient Education Pamphlet is provided for your information. It is not medical advice and should not be relied upon as a substitute for visiting your doctor. If you need medical care, have any questions, or wish to receive the full text of this Patient Education Pamphlet, please contact your obstetrician-gynecologist.

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