

## **CANCER OF THE OVARIES, WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW**

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Cancer of the ovaries is a cancer that is feared by all women, especially those who have a relative or friend who had this dreaded cancer. The ovary is the organ that produces the female 'egg' or 'ovum' and the female hormones. The ovary is made up of the 'egg producing areas or cells', the 'covering cells' and the cells which form the 'stroma' of the ovary. Each type of cell of the ovary has its particular function e.g. to produce the 'egg' each month or to produce hormones. Women have two ovaries, one on each side of the uterus.

Cancer of the ovaries is a dreaded disease, because in the United States, more women die of this cancer than cancer of the cervix and endometrium (lining of the uterus) combined. This is because very early changes in the cells of the cervix (pre-cancer) before it even becomes cancer, can be detected by regular Papanicolaou smear tests ('Screening' test-Pap tests) and treated. By having regular Pap tests, the occurrence of cancer of the cervix has been decreased by at least 70%.

Cancer of the lining of the uterus is a cancer that mostly affects women who are postmenopausal. 9 out of 10 times the early and first symptom is bleeding from the uterus which is seen by the woman coming out via the vagina, after she has attained menopause – called 'post-menopausal bleeding' – is an alarming symptom, the woman goes to her doctor quickly, and gets diagnosed fairly early, therefore deaths are avoided.

Cancer of the ovaries is dangerous because there are no consistent early symptoms, there are no early signs, and there is no 'screening' test yet developed despite many years of research by scientists throughout the world. A woman's risk of getting cancer of the ovaries in her entire lifetime is 1 in 67-80. Compare this to cancer of the breasts where the lifetime chance of getting the cancer is 1 in 8. However; due to mammography, which is a good screening test, the rate of deaths from breast cancer are steadily decreasing because mammography detects the cancer early. **There is no such test for ovarian cancer.** The risk of getting cancer of the ovaries is higher for white women than it is for Black women. If the cancer of the ovaries is found early when it has not spread outside the ovary then the chances that the woman will survive 5 years or more is 94%. However; only 19% (~1 in 5) cancers of the ovary are found at this early stage.

#### **What are the risk factors for getting cancer of the ovary(ies)?**

- **age** – a woman can get this cancer at any age, however; as she grows older the risk increases. This cancer occurs most commonly in women who are between 50-75 years old. It is less common in women younger than age 40.
- **race** – it is more common in women who are white and less common in black women, cause unknown
- **never pregnant** – women who have never been pregnant are more likely to have this cancer, cause unknown
- **fertility drugs** – it used to be thought that taking fertility drugs increases the chances of this cancer but research has shown no special correlation
- **cancer of other organs** – such as that of the uterus, breast, colon or rectum are more likely to have this cancer
- **family history of cancer** – women who have a mother, sister, daughter with this cancer or who have a family history of cancer of the breasts, colon, uterus or rectum also have a higher incidence
- **estrogen only hormone replacement** – some research supports that taking only estrogen as hormone replacement may increase the risk

**REMEMBER THAT EVEN IF A WOMAN HAS RISK FACTORS THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT SHE WILL DEVELOP THIS CANCER. MOST WOMEN DO NOT DEVELOP THIS CANCER EVEN IF RISK FACTORS ARE PRESENT.**

**REMEMBER ALSO THAT MOST WOMEN WHO DO GET THIS CANCER HAVE NO KNOWN RISK FACTORS, EXCEPT THAT THEY ARE OLDER IN AGE.**

#### **CAN YOU LOWER YOUR RISK? YES**

The following factors lower the risk

- taking the birth control pill, the risk is decreased by taking the pill for any length of time and if the pill has been taken for more than five years then the risk may be half of baseline, also the protection lasts for up to 15 years after stopping the pill
- having your tubes ligated – cause is not known
- having a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus) – cause is not known
- having more than 2 children
- breastfeeding your children for at least one year combined over all their pregnancies
- 'prophylactic' ('to prevent') removal of both ovaries – for women who have a very strong family history of ovarian cancer, however the benefits of this are still controversial and are under debate by scientists because removal of ovaries has significant bad effects on the woman's health (e.g. increase in chances of heart disease and stroke)

Ovarian cancer is so dangerous because there are no early symptoms. In fact, there are very few and vague symptoms even in later stages, and that is why most cancers of the ovaries are not found early. Symptoms may be mild and so vague that the woman herself may ignore them for some time. Symptoms can be as follows

- sense of discomfort in the pelvic region (lower abdomen)
- feeling of 'gas' all the time, symptoms of indigestion and feeling full even on eating just a little food, 'bloating' that cannot be explained by examination of the gastrointestinal system
- rarely for cancers that produce hormones, there may be bleeding from the vagina
- later there may be swelling of the abdomen, increase in girth of the abdomen and even later pain abdomen

#### **IS THERE A SCREENING TEST TO DETECT CANCER OF THE OVARIES? NO**

The best way to detect cancer of the ovary early is to have a regular pelvic examination yearly. In this way, if there are any changes from year to year or if the ovary (ies) seems enlarged on examination, then further tests can be done to find out why the ovary is enlarged. An ultrasound examination of an enlarged ovary may be used to find out if there is suspicion of cancer, however ultrasound is not yet accepted as a 'screening test'.

What about the CA-125 blood test? The problem with this test is that the levels may be high even if the woman has no cancer, and is raised in many conditions that have nothing to do with cancer of the ovary e.g. pregnancy; therefore this test is not reliable to suggest cancer of the ovaries. On the other hand there are cancers of the ovary that do not raise CA-125 levels at all and so these cancers will be missed if this test is used to screen for ovarian cancer.

**AT THE PRESENT TIME, THE UNITED STATES PREVENTIVE SERVICES TASK FORCE (USPSTF) RECOMMENDS AGAINST ROUTINE SCREENING FOR OVARIAN CANCER, BECAUSE RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT THE POTENTIAL HARMS OF SCREENING ARE MORE THAN THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF SCREENING.**

If a woman does have cancer of the ovaries, she will undergo surgery, possibly chemotherapy with cancer killing medication and or radiation. She will be under the care of a cancer specialist. There are many support groups and community organizations that help women to understand their disease and to cope with the disease as well as its treatment.

The most important facts that a woman must remember

- **cancer of the ovary is NOT the number one cause of death among women.**
- It is not even the number one cause of cancer deaths among women. Cancer of the ovaries ranks fifth among cancer deaths in women after lung, bronchus, breast, colon and pancreatic cancers.
- Cancer of the ovaries is the seventh most common cancer among women after cancers of the lung, breast, colon, uterus and cervix.
- **REMEMBER, IN YOUR ENTIRE LIFETIME YOU AS A WOMAN HAVE 10 TIMES MORE CHANCES OF DEVELOPING CANCER OF THE BREASTS THAN CANCER OF THE OVARIES (1 IN 8 AS COMPARED TO 1 IN ~80).**
- **REMEMBER THE NUMBER ONE KILLER FOR WOMEN IS STILL HEART DISEASE SUCH AS HEART ATTACK AND NOT CANCER OF THE OVARIES.**
- **There is NO SCREENING TEST for cancer of the ovaries**
- **A regular yearly gynecological/pelvic examination may help, (by detecting early changes in the pelvic examination if performed by the same physician each year)**
- **Being aware of the vague but persistent symptoms if they are present for some length of time**

**DO NOT BE SO AFRAID OF CANCER OF THE OVARIES.**

GET YOUR GYNECOLOGICAL EXAMINATION EVERY YEAR AND SPEAK WITH YOUR PHYSICIAN IF YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS.

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