Ovarian Cancer

Inside Knowledge
Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer

There are five main types of cancer that affect a woman's reproductive organs: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar. As a group, they are referred to as gynecologic (GY-neh-kuh-LAH-jik) cancer. (A sixth type of gynecologic cancer is the very rare fallopian tube cancer.)

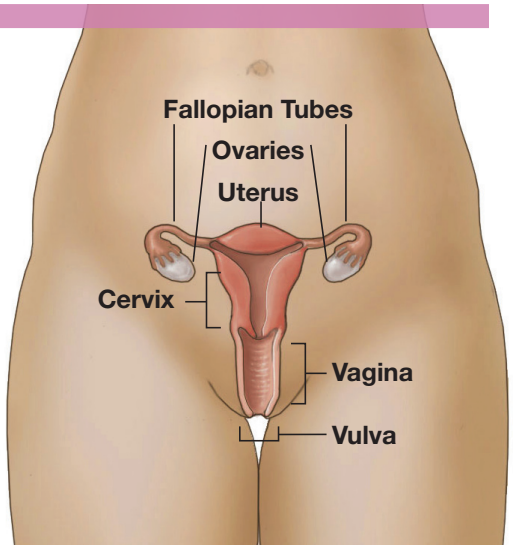
This fact sheet about ovarian cancer is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer* campaign. The campaign helps women get the facts about gynecologic cancer, providing important "inside knowledge" about their bodies and health.

What is ovarian cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. Cancer is always named for the part of the body where it starts, even if it spreads to other body parts later.

When cancer starts in the ovaries, it is called ovarian cancer. Women have two ovaries that are located in the pelvis, one on each side of the uterus. The ovaries make female hormones and produce eggs.

When ovarian cancer is found in its early stages, treatment is most effective.



What raises a woman's chance of getting ovarian cancer?

There is no way to know for sure if you will get ovarian cancer. Most women get it without being at high risk. However, the following factors may increase a woman's risk for ovarian cancer:

- Being middle-aged or older.
- Having close family members (such as your mother, sister, aunt, or grandmother) on either your mother's or your father's side who have had ovarian cancer.
- Having had breast, uterine, or colorectal cancer.
- Having an Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jewish background.
- Having never given birth or having had trouble getting pregnant.
- Having endometriosis (a condition where tissue from the lining of the uterus grows elsewhere in the body).

If you have one or more of these factors, it does not mean you will get ovarian cancer. But you should speak with your doctor, nurse, or other health care professional about your risk.

Who gets ovarian cancer?

All women are at risk for ovarian cancer, but older women are more likely to get the disease than younger women. About 90 percent of women who get ovarian cancer are older than 40, with the greatest number of ovarian cancers occurring in women aged 60 years or older.

Each year, approximately 20,000 women in the United States get ovarian cancer. Among women in the United States, ovarian cancer is the eighth most common cancer and the fifth leading cause of cancer death.

Inside Knowledge is an initiative that supports the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act of 2005, or Johanna's Law, which was unanimously passed by the U.S. House and Senate in December of 2006, and signed into law in January 2007.

What are the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer may cause one or more of these signs and symptoms:

- **Vaginal bleeding (particularly if you are past menopause) or discharge from your vagina that is not normal for you.**
- **Pain or pressure in the pelvic or abdominal area (the area below your stomach and in between your hip bones).**
- **Back pain.**
- **Bloating, which is when the area below your stomach swells or feels full.**
- **Feeling full quickly while eating.**
- **A change in your bathroom habits, such as having to pass urine very badly or very often, constipation, or diarrhea.**

Pay attention to your body, and know what is normal for you. If you have vaginal bleeding that is not normal for you, see a doctor right away. If you have any of the other signs for two weeks or longer, see a doctor. These symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to see your doctor. Treatment is most effective when ovarian cancer is found and treated early.

How can I prevent ovarian cancer?

There is no known way to prevent ovarian cancer. But these things may lower your chance of getting ovarian cancer:

- Having used birth control pills for more than five years.
- Having had a tubal ligation (getting your tubes tied), both ovaries removed, or hysterectomy (an operation in which the uterus, and sometimes the cervix, is removed).
- Having given birth.

Are there tests that can find ovarian cancer early?

There is no simple and reliable way to test for ovarian cancer in women who do not have any signs or symptoms. **The Pap test does not screen for ovarian cancer. The only cancer the Pap test screens for is cervical cancer.** However, here are steps you can take:

- Pay attention to your body, and know what is normal for you.
- If you notice any changes in your body that are not normal for you and could be a sign of ovarian cancer, talk to your doctor and ask about possible causes, such as ovarian cancer.
- Ask your doctor if you should have a test, such as a rectovaginal pelvic exam, a transvaginal ultrasound, or a CA-125 blood test if:
  - You have any unexplained signs or symptoms of ovarian cancer. These tests sometimes help find or rule out ovarian cancer.
  - You have had breast, uterine, or colorectal cancer; or a close relative has had ovarian cancer.

What should I do if my doctor says I have ovarian cancer?

If your doctor says that you have ovarian cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist—a doctor who has been trained to treat cancers like this. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.

Where can I find more information about ovarian and other gynecologic cancers?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 1-800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/cancer

National Cancer Institute: 1-800-4-CANCER or www.cancer.gov

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