

About Ovarian Cancer – A Quick Guide



Contents

This is a brief summary of the information on 'About ovarian cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

- The ovaries
- Ovarian cysts
- Risks and causes
- Screening
- Symptoms
- Should I see a specialist?
- Types of ovarian cancer
- Questions for your doctor about ovarian cancer

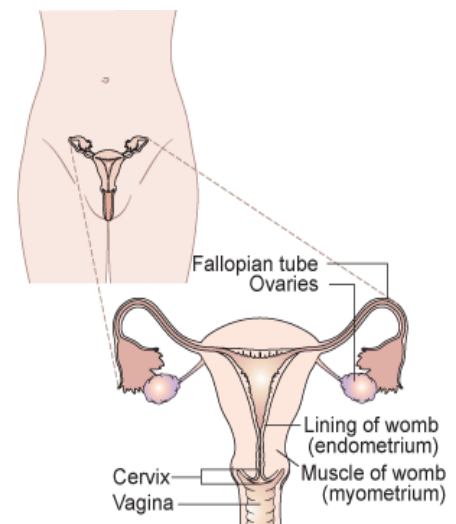


Diagram showing the parts of the female reproductive system
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The ovaries

The ovaries are part of a woman's reproductive system. The reproductive system is made up of the vagina, womb or uterus (which includes the cervix), fallopian tubes and ovaries.

There are two ovaries, one on each side of the body. The ovaries produce an egg each month in fertile women. The ovaries also produce the female sex hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. The ovaries produce these hormones throughout the childbearing time of a woman's life. It is the hormones that control the menstrual cycle. As you get older and menopause approaches, the ovaries make less and less of these hormones and periods eventually stop altogether.



Ovarian cysts

Before the menopause, fertile women develop cysts in the ovary every month as an egg develops. Cysts are fluid filled sacks. They are not usually cancerous. But they should be investigated if they are there for longer than normal, are unusually large, cause symptoms or if you get them when you are post-menopausal.

Ovarian cancer risks and causes

Ovarian cancer is the 5th most common cancer in women.

This information is about risk factors for epithelial ovarian cancer, which makes up almost 90% of cases of ovarian cancer. Epithelial means surface layer. So this is cancer of the surface layer covering the ovary.

We do not know exactly what causes epithelial ovarian cancer. But there are some things that may increase the risk. And other factors that seem to reduce it.

As with most cancers, the risk of developing ovarian cancer increases with age. Most cases are in women who are past their menopause. A family history of cancer is one of the most important risk factors for ovarian cancer. About 1 in 10 ovarian cancers (10%) are caused by an inherited faulty gene.

Other possible risk factors include infertility, using HRT, being overweight or tall, having endometriosis and using talcum powder.

Ovarian cancer screening

Before screening for any type of cancer can be carried out, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there.

And it must not give false positive results in people who do not have cancer.

At the moment, there is no screening test that is accurate and reliable enough to detect ovarian cancer in the general population. But there are clinical trials going on looking into screening. Until these trials publish their findings, we won't know whether the screening tests work or not.

Screening women at higher risk

Higher than average risk means having 2 or more relatives on the same side of the family diagnosed with ovarian cancer or breast cancer at a young age, particularly if there were diagnosed before they were 50.

If you think you are at higher than average risk for ovarian cancer, you should talk to your GP. He or she can get in touch with your local genetics service (family cancer clinic). Staff at the centre will ask questions about your family history and offer you counselling about the possible risks and benefits of screening. But you must bear in mind that the screening tests have not been fully tested yet and there is no guarantee that they will pick up every case of early ovarian cancer.

Ovarian cancer symptoms

The symptoms of ovarian cancer can be very vague, particularly when the disease is in its early stages.

Symptoms of early stage ovarian cancer

Many women with early stage cancer of the ovary don't report any symptoms at all. Early symptoms can include pain in the lower abdomen or side, and/or a bloated, full feeling in the abdomen.



Symptoms of ovarian cancer that has grown outside the ovary

Once the cancer has grown out of the ovary, it can cause symptoms from the tumour growing anywhere in the area between the hip bones (the pelvis). This can cause lower tummy (abdominal) pain, back pain, passing urine more often than usual, constipation, pain during sex, or a swollen abdomen. Women may also have irregular periods or bleeding after the menopause.

Symptoms of advanced ovarian cancer

Advanced ovarian cancer can cause even more symptoms because the cancer has spread into the abdomen or elsewhere in the body. These can include a loss of appetite, feeling or being sick, constipation, tiredness, shortness of breath, or a noticeable swelling of the abdomen. You may have a loss of appetite, feeling full after eating or a general feeling of fullness in the abdomen.

If you do have any of these symptoms, go to your doctor and get a check up. Remember, other diseases apart from ovarian cancer can cause these symptoms. Most women with symptoms like these will not have cancer.

Should I see an ovarian cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who has something much less serious. But there are particular symptoms that mean your GP should carry out urgent tests or refer you to a specialist straight away. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) says doctors should examine you if you have symptoms such as

- Tummy pain
- Swelling or bloating of your tummy (abdomen)
- Constipation
- Back pain
- Urinary symptoms

If your doctor is concerned, they should do a full pelvic examination. This will include an internal examination, if you agree to have one. If your GP can feel a lump in your tummy, or has other cause for concern, you should have an urgent ultrasound scan. If an urgent scan appointment isn't available, your GP should refer you to a specialist urgently. You should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks.

If you have symptoms and you do not think your GP is taking them seriously enough, you could print out this page and take it to discuss with them.

Types of ovarian cancer

This information is about 'epithelial' cancer of the ovary. Almost 9 out of 10 tumours of the ovary (90%) diagnosed are this type. Other types of ovarian cancer include 'germ cell' tumours (cancer of the egg-making cells of the ovary) and sarcomas.

There are many other ovarian cancer cell types. Doctors and researchers are investigating whether these subtypes should be treated in a different way to epithelial ovarian cancer. Generally, they are treated in the same way - the specific diagnosis won't make much difference to either your treatment or the usual course of the disease. But you may hear your doctor talk about serous, mucinous, endometrioid, clear cell, undifferentiated or unclassifiable



ovarian cancer. More than half the diagnosed cases of epithelial ovarian cancer are the serous type.

Epithelial ovarian cancer starts in the surface layer covering the ovary. There are a variety of types. They are grouped together according to their behaviour and cell type. The behaviour of cancers means how quickly or slowly they grow. Doctors usually call this the grade of the cancer. They group the cancers together as borderline, well differentiated, moderately differentiated and poorly or undifferentiated.

Cancer cells that look very like normal cells are described as well differentiated. They tend to grow and spread more slowly than cancer with undifferentiated cells. The treatment of borderline ovarian tumours can be different to other types of ovarian cancer because they are unlikely to spread.

Questions for your doctor about ovarian cancer

- How will I know if I have ovarian cancer?
- My mother had ovarian cancer. How does this affect my risk?
- Are there any symptoms I should look out for?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of ovarian cancer?
- There is ovarian cancer running in my family. Can you refer me to a family genetics clinic?

- I would like to be screened. How can I go about this?
- Is genetic testing available for women with ovarian cancer in their families?

More information

For more information about ovarian cancer, visit our website <http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

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