

About Ovarian Cancer

A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of 'About ovarian cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

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You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

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.

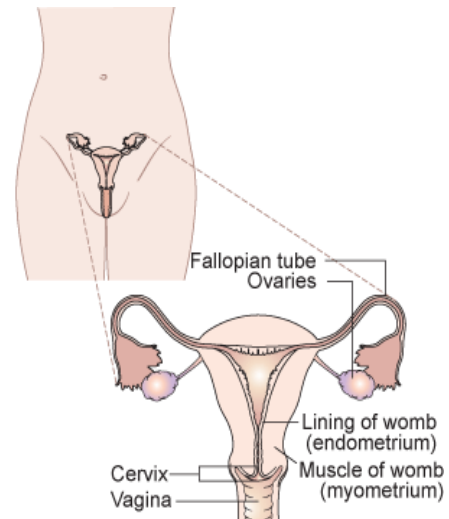


Diagram showing the parts of the female reproductive system
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There are 2 ovaries, one on each side of the body. The ovaries produce an egg each month in fertile women. The ovaries also produce the female sex hormones, oestrogen and progesterone. Your ovaries produce these hormones throughout the years of your life when it is possible for you to become pregnant. The hormones control your 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. These normally disappear within a few months. 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 in the UK.

This information is about risk factors for epithelial ovarian cancer, which makes up almost 9 out of 10 cases (90%) 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 and having endometriosis.

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 looking into screening. A large UK trial is expected to publish their final results in 2015.

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 they 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. They 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 your options, including 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

Symptoms of early stage ovarian cancer

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

Symptoms of very early ovarian cancer

Many women with very early 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 sickness, 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, particularly if they don't go away, 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?

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. National guidelines say that GPs should examine you if you have symptoms such as

- Tummy (abdominal) or pelvic pain
- Long lasting swelling or bloating of your tummy (abdomen)
- Needing to pass urine more often than usual (frequency) or more suddenly than usual (urgency)
- Loss of appetite or feeling full quickly

If your doctor is concerned, they should do a full pelvic examination. This will include an internal examination, if you agree to have one. You may have a CA125 blood test. This is a general test and can't diagnose ovarian cancer on its own. But it can help to show that something may be wrong. 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. 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 take this information along to discuss with them.

Types of ovarian cancer

Epithelial ovarian cancer is the most common type, making up about 9 out of 10 tumours of the ovary (90%). Rarer types of ovarian cancer include germ cell tumours (cancer of the egg making cells of the ovary) and sarcomas.

Epithelial ovarian cancer generally starts in the surface layer covering the ovary. There are various subtypes of epithelial ovarian cancer. Serous epithelial ovarian cancer is the most common. Doctors now think that some serous cancers actually start in cells at the far end of the fallopian tube, then spread to the ovary. Other subtypes of epithelial ovarian cancer are mucinous, endometrioid, clear cell, undifferentiated or unclassifiable. At the moment they are all generally treated in the same way. But doctors and researchers are investigating whether the less common subtypes need to be treated in a different way to serous epithelial ovarian cancer.

Borderline ovarian tumours

Borderline ovarian tumours are different to ovarian cancer because they do not grow into the supportive tissue of the ovary (the stroma). They are also called tumours of low malignant potential. About 10 out of 100 epithelial ovarian tumours (10%) are this type.

Borderline ovarian tumours grow slowly and most are diagnosed at an early stage, when the abnormal cells are still within the ovary. They are usually cured with surgery alone.

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?

For more information, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/cancerhelp>

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. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

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

Adapted from Cancer Research UK's Patient Information Website CancerHelp UK in February 2014. CancerHelp UK is not designed to provide medical advice or professional services and is intended to be for educational use only. The information provided through CancerHelp UK and our nurse team is not a substitute for professional care and should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. If you have, or suspect you may have, a health problem you should consult your doctor. Copyright Cancer Research UK 2014. Cancer Research UK is a registered charity in England and Wales (1089464), Scotland (SC041666) and in the Isle of Man (1103)