



Ovarian Cancer: *What You Need to Know*

According to the American Cancer Society, ovarian cancer is the 5th leading cause of cancer related deaths among women. One in 98 women will die from this disease and 20,180 will be diagnosed in 2006. Ovarian cancer begins in the ovaries but may spread to other organs in advanced stages of the disease.

Ovarian Cancer Stages

The most common form of ovarian cancer, epithelial ovarian cancer, develops from the cells that cover the outer surface of the ovary, and is identified in four separate stages.

1. **Stage I** – Growth of the cancer is limited to one or both ovaries.
2. **Stage II** – Growth of the cancer involves one or both ovaries and has spread to other areas within the pelvis.
3. **Stage III** – Growth of the cancer involves one or both ovaries and has spread to the lining of the abdomen or lymph nodes (small glands in the body).
 - a. Cancer cells are in the lining of the abdomen but are too small to see without a microscope. The cancer has not yet spread to lymph nodes.
 - b. The tumor is in one or both ovaries, and deposits of cancer in the abdomen are large enough for the surgeon to see, but do not exceed 2cm in diameter. The cancer has not yet spread to the lymph nodes.
 - c. The tumor is on one or both ovaries and one or both of the following is present: 1) the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes; and/or 2) the deposits of cancer exceed 2cm in diameter and are found in the abdomen.

Screening

While there is no consistently reliable, accurate screening test to detect ovarian cancer, the following tests are available and should be used under the supervision of a medical professional:

- *Annual vaginal exam* for women age 18 and above and annual rectovaginal exam for women age 35 and above.
- *Transvaginal sonography*, especially for those at high risk. (An ultrasound performed with a small instrument placed in the vagina.)
- *CA-125 blood test* to determine if the level of a tumor marker called CA-125 has increased in the blood for women at high risk.

NOTE: A traditional Pap Test does not detect ovarian cancer.

Ovarian Cancer Symptoms

- Pelvic or abdominal pain or discomfort
- Vague but persistent gastrointestinal upsets such as gas, nausea, and indigestion
- Frequency and/or urgency of urination in the absence of an infection
- Unexplained weight gain or weight loss
- Pelvic and/or abdominal swelling, bloating and/or feeling of fullness
- Ongoing unusual fatigue
- Unexplained changes in bowel habits

Treatment Options

- Surgery to remove the cancerous growth.
- Chemotherapy relies on drugs to kill cancerous cells.
- Radiation therapy uses high-energy x-rays to kill cancer cells and shrink tumors.

4. **Stage IV** – This is the most advanced stage of ovarian cancer in which the cancer growth involves one or both ovaries and the cancer has spread to other organs in the body such as the liver and lungs.

Unfortunately, 75% of women with ovarian cancer are not diagnosed until the disease is at an advanced stage (Stage III or IV). If caught in stage I, the five year survival rate is over 90%. If caught in stage III or IV, the survival rate can be as low as 29%.

Risk Factors

Since early diagnosis is so important, it is crucial for women to recognize the risk factors for this disease, including:

- Genetic predisposition
- Personal or family history of breast, ovarian or colon cancer
- Increasing age
- Undesired infertility

If a woman's risk factors fit any of these criteria, she should consult her doctor.

Clinical Trials

Ovarian cancer patients and those at risk of developing the disease may also qualify for clinical trials. The list of internet sites below provides valuable information for women considering participating in a trial.

National Ovarian Cancer Coalition
1-888-OVARIAN
www.ovarian.org

Cancer Trials Support Unit
1-888-823-5923
www.ctsu.org

Coalition of National Cooperative Groups
1-877-520-4457
www.cancertrials-help.org

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