



# Women's Health: Ovarian Cancer

Due to the quiet symptoms of ovarian cancer, the disease can be difficult to detect. However, if caught early, it is treatable.

## Risk Factors

Why one woman may get ovarian cancer and another does not is not understood. However, some factors make a woman more likely to develop the most common form of ovarian cancer called epithelial ovarian cancer:

- *Age* – The risk of ovarian cancer increases with age. It occurs mostly in women who have gone through menopause.
- *Family history* – A history of ovarian or breast cancer on either side of a woman's family will increase her chances of getting either disease. This is especially true of women with family members who developed the disease at a young age.
- *Reproductive history* – Some studies have found that the use of certain fertility drugs over time without achieving pregnancy may increase a woman's chances of getting ovarian cancer. Additionally, women who start menstruating at an early age, have no children or have their first child after age 30, or experience menopause after age 50 may have an increased risk of ovarian cancer. A

relationship seems to exist between the number of menstrual cycles in a woman's lifetime and the likelihood of developing ovarian cancer.

In addition to these risk factors, a few factors may reduce a woman's likelihood of developing ovarian cancer. Some research has indicated that using oral contraceptives may decrease the risk of developing ovarian cancer, especially when they are used for five years or more. Research has also shown that women who undergo tubal ligation or a hysterectomy may also have decreased chances of developing this disease.

## Symptoms

Symptoms of ovarian cancer often do not present themselves until the cancer has already spread. Some symptoms include:

- Feelings of being bloated, or fullness in the pelvic area
- Vague stomach or pelvic discomfort
- Gastrointestinal symptoms, changes in bowel habits, indigestion, nausea and weight

changes

- Lower back pain, loss of appetite and fatigue

## Diagnosis

Currently, no single test exists that can detect ovarian cancer easily and early. The best chance for early detection is a yearly gynecological exam that includes a pelvic exam and a Pap smear. Yearly physical exams are also important.

## Treatment

Treatment for ovarian cancer varies depending on the stage of the disease at the time it is diagnosed. Taking good care of yourself, and getting yearly gynecological and physical exams is extremely important. Moreover, know if you have any risk factors, especially a family history of ovarian or breast cancer, be sure to tell your doctor.



## Did you know...?

Ovarian cancer is the fifth most common cause of cancer deaths among women, according to the American Cancer Society, accounting for 5 percent of all cancers in women. It causes more deaths than any other cancer of the female reproductive system.