



Mary C Kirk, MD

September

Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month & Cancer Screening Awareness

Ovarian Cancer



Most women have some level of awareness about breast cancer thanks to recent media campaigns, but fewer women are knowledgeable about the signs, symptoms and risk factors for ovarian cancer. Ovarian cancer is the 7th most common cancer and the 8th most common cause of death. About 20,000 women each year will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer in the United States. Ovarian cancer *risk does increase with age*. The average age of diagnosis for ovarian cancer is 63 years of age.



Ovarian cancer is one of the most frightening cancers due to the fact that patients remain largely asymptomatic in the beginning stages of the disease. There are no standard screening tests for ovarian cancer and by the time that many women seek help, the disease has reached its more dangerous stages of advanced progression. This isn't to say that ovarian cancer has NO signs or symptoms, they are simply easy to ignore. Many of the symptoms may be dismissed as the side effects of an aging body or menopause.

Signs & Symptoms



The main symptoms associated with ovarian cancer are:

- Abdominal Bloating
- Urinary Urgency or Frequency
- Pelvic/Abdominal Discomfort
- Difficulty Eating or Feeling Full Quickly

There are also some secondary symptoms that, if accompanied by the symptoms listed above are considered of concern:

- Nausea, indigestion, gas, constipation or diarrhea

- Extreme fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Backaches
- Increasing abdominal girth and central weight gain

Risks

Remember, if you are experiencing these symptoms, most likely you *do not* have ovarian cancer. Ovarian cancer is relatively rare and these indicators may all be attributed to far more common causes. However, it is **always** a good idea to get things checked out by a gynecologist.



Ovarian cancer risk is related to ovulation. The more ovulations in a lifetime then the greater risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Early menstruation and late menopause, obesity, endometriosis, never having borne children or receiving infertility treatments may increase the risk of ovarian cancer. Conversely, fewer ovulations such as with pregnancy, breast feeding and oral contraceptives lessen the lifetime risk of ovarian cancer. The risk is also decreased with a tubal ligation, hysterectomy or surgical removal of the ovaries and fallopian tubes. Caucasian women have a 30-40% higher risk of developing ovarian cancer.

A family history of ovarian, fallopian tube, breast, and/or peritoneal cancer, and/or a personal history of breast cancer are associated with much higher risks of ovarian cancer as well. Women who carry the BrCa 1 and/or BrCa 2 gene have a 50% risk of developing ovarian cancer, but yet only 10% of ovarian cancer falls into this breast cancer genetic risk association.

Some women who claim multiple risk factors may be eligible for genetic testing to determine whether they carry gene mutations known to cause ovarian cancer such as the BRCA 1 or BRCA 2 genes or the genes for Lynch Syndrome. We do offer this saliva DNA testing in the office.

Learn more about genetic risks by following the links below.

[BRCA Mutations](#)

[Lynch Syndrome](#)

Risk Reduction



Risk awareness and management are your best defense against ovarian cancer. Know your family's cancer history and make sure that your specialist is aware of it. Inquire about genetic testing. An annual bi-manual pelvic exam to check the ovaries is your best screening test followed by pelvic ultrasound, blood testing and possible CT exam.

Oral contraceptive use, weight management, bearing children, and breastfeeding have all been linked with a reduction of ovarian cancer risk.

If a woman is determined to be at very high risk for ovarian cancer based on genetic testing and/or family history, surgical risk reduction such as removal of the ovaries and fallopian tubes or a hysterectomy may be an option.

Female Cancer Screenings



Thankfully, other more common gynecological cancers have screening protocols with very successful rates of early detection. Breast cancer and cervical cancer are very real concerns for women. However, due to screening tests mortality rates for these cancers are both in decline.

~ Cervical Cancer ~

Prior to the 1950's cervical cancer was one of the most common cancers and a major cause of death in women in the US. The introduction of the Pap Smear changed everything. Routine Pap Smear testing has reduced incidence and death rates from cervical cancer by more than 80%. Because precancerous cells can be detected before



malignant lesions develop, women can be treated and cured before ever receiving a cancer diagnosis. The most common symptom of cervical cancer is abnormal vaginal bleeding in a sexually active woman.



The next radical change in the fight against cervical cancer came with the development of the HPV vaccine. In the 1980's it was discovered that **virtually all** (99%) cases of cervical cancer are linked to HPV infection. The human papilloma virus is sexually transmitted, has many different strains (more than 150), is highly prevalent in the population, and

may lie dormant for long periods of time up to 10-20 years. Administering the HPV vaccine series reduces the risk of developing cervical cancer by 93%! The vaccine is designed to be administered prior to the onset of sexual activity. The vaccine is FDA approved for both boys and girls at age 11 years and is offered through insurance up until age 26. Discuss with your provider or pediatrician what the appropriate age is to initiate the vaccine series.

Risk factors for Cervical cancer are related to the number of lifetime sexual partners who may expose you to the HPV virus and to cigarette smoking, which lowers the body's ability to fight the virus. Women with a weakened immune system from chronic medical illness may also be more susceptible to the virus.

Using barrier contraceptives with spermicide, limiting the number of sexual partners and practicing abstinence will reduce the risk of cervical cancer. Discuss with your provider how frequently you should be screened for HPV and have a Pap Smear performed.

~ Breast Cancer ~

Annually approximately 41,000 women and 2500 men will be diagnosed with breast cancer in the United States. The technology for detecting breast cancer has changed significantly through the years and dramatically in the last three years. Mammography sensitivity and specificity has improved with the addition of all digital imaging and 3-D technology. Other screening techniques have also become available to women with dense/fibrous breast tissue or other factors that might hinder routine mammography. ABUS (automated breast ultrasound) and breast MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) are very effective complimentary techniques to routine mammography. Your doctor can help you to decide which screening tests are best for you based on your physical exam, past experience and family history.



According to the American Cancer Society, the 5-year survival rate for women with breast cancer was 75.2 percent in 1975, but in 2008, it was 90.6 percent. This trend has been attributed to increased screening efforts. With all cancers, the earlier the detection the greater the chance of successful treatment. In 2016 nearly 61% of breast cancers were diagnosed at a Stage I level of disease. If diagnosed early breast cancer can have a 98.8-100% five year survival. Many women are fearful of the radiation exposure from an annual Mammogram. The radiation exposure during Mammography is equal or less than the radiation exposed to you in the upper atmosphere when you take that airline ride to your vacation destination!!! There is no reason to worry.



Most insurance companies cover yearly screenings at 100% beginning at age 40 years. Additional testing and risk reduction procedures may be covered under your plan based on your exam, history and genetic testing results.

Improved statistics for cancer detection and treatment are only applicable if the appropriate screenings are utilized by your health care provider!

Cancer is very scary. It can also be very frightening to know that you are at increased risk for cancer. Knowledge is power! Take control of your health and be aware. It may save your life!



Next Month..

Breast Cancer Awareness Month: Genetics and Risk Management for Breast Cancer

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