



Recognize the Signs of Ovarian Cancer

While ovarian cancer is the deadliest of the gynecological cancers, if it is detected early, it can frequently be successfully managed and treated.

Unfortunately, ovarian cancer is too often diagnosed in its later stages, when it has already spread beyond the ovaries. Last year 15,000 women in the United States died from this relatively rare disease, which accounts for only 3% of all cancers among women.

The prognosis is much better when the disease is caught while it is limited to the ovaries. The survival rate among women diagnosed with early-stage ovarian cancer is more than 90%, according to M. D. Anderson's Ovarian Screening Clinic.

The six symptoms

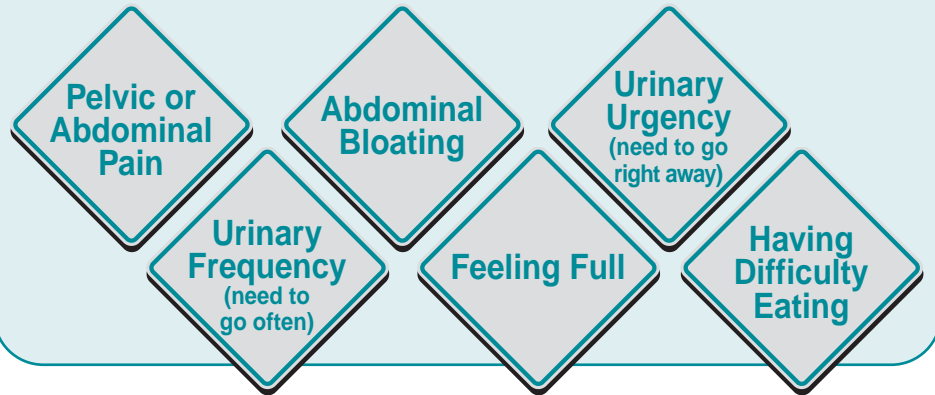
A problem in detecting the disease is that early symptoms are often overlooked because they're vague and resemble those of more common ailments. To help women identify ovarian cancer, researchers at the University of Washington recently determined six specific symptoms of the disease (see box).

The study's lead researcher, Barbara Goff, M.D., reported that while all women have these symptoms occasionally, they should be brought to a doctor's attention if "it's something new to you and it persists for more than a couple of weeks and occurs almost daily or every day." In the study, published in the journal *Cancer*, most women with ovarian cancer reported experiencing at least one of these symptoms and usually had them 12 or more times per month.

Other possible indications of ovarian cancer include changes in bowel habits; persistent gastrointestinal complaints such as gas, nausea, and indigestion; and unexplained weight loss or gain.

Health professionals at the M. D. Anderson Gynecologic Oncology

The following symptoms are often the result of something less serious than ovarian cancer. But if you are experiencing one or more of these symptoms frequently for the first time, tell your gynecologist.



Center say that a woman with any of these ongoing symptoms should discuss them immediately with a gynecologist. A full physical and gynecological exam can help determine the cause. If abnormalities are detected, special blood tests and ultrasound can be used to look for ovarian masses.

Even if you are frequently experiencing symptoms, ovarian cancer is still unlikely. More probable are a number of common illnesses, such as irritable bowel syndrome, which a doctor can rule out before checking for ovarian cancer.

There are currently no adequate screening tests for ovarian cancer, though there are some clinical trials of screening techniques at M. D. Anderson open to women at average or high risk for ovarian cancer. Ovarian cancer screening at M. D. Anderson's Gynecologic Oncology Center typically involves a discussion of your medical history and family background; a physical and a pelvic exam; a transvaginal ultrasound, a radiologic procedure that provides a picture of the ovaries; and a CA-125 blood test. Color-flow Doppler ultrasound, which measures blood flow in the ovarian vessels, may also be performed.

If you are diagnosed with ovarian cancer, surgery is the next step. During surgery, doctors will confirm the diagnosis and stage of the disease and remove the cancerous tissue from the ovary and surrounding areas. Usually the fallopian tubes, uterus, and one

or both ovaries are removed. Most patients will later receive chemotherapy to kill any remaining cancer cells.

Risk factors

The exact causes of ovarian cancer are not known, but women may be at increased risk for the disease if:

- Their mother, sister, or daughter had ovarian or breast cancer.
- They themselves have had breast, endometrial, or colon cancer.
- They have a history of infertility or used fertility drugs.
- They are of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage.
- They have a mutation or abnormal change in the *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* genes. This would indicate susceptibility to breast and ovarian cancers.

For more information about the disease or ovarian cancer screening, go to www.mdanderson.org/diseases/ovarian. ●

For more information, talk to your physician, or:

- call askMDAnderson at 1-877-632-6789
- visit www.mdanderson.org.

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