

# Ovarian Cancer

There are five main types of cancer that affect a woman's reproductive organs: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar. As a group, they are referred to as gynecologic (GY-neh-kuh-LAH-jik) cancer. (A sixth type of gynecologic cancer is the very rare fallopian tube cancer.)

This fact sheet about ovarian cancer is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *National Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Campaign*. The campaign helps women get the facts about gynecologic cancer, providing important "inside knowledge" about their bodies and health.



## What is ovarian cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. Cancer is always named for the part of the body where it starts, even if it spreads to other body parts later.

When cancer starts in the ovaries, it is called ovarian cancer. Women have two ovaries that are located in the pelvis, one on each side of the uterus. The ovaries make female hormones and produce eggs.

When ovarian cancer is found in its early stages, treatment is most effective.

## What raises a woman's chance of getting ovarian cancer?

There is no way to know for sure if you will get ovarian cancer. Most women get it without being at high risk. However, there are several factors that may increase the chance that you will get ovarian cancer, including if you:

- Are middle-aged or older.
- Have close family members (such as your mother, sister, aunt, or grandmother) on either your mother's or your father's side who have had ovarian cancer.
- Have had breast, uterine, or colorectal cancer.
- Have an Eastern European (Ashkenazi) Jewish background.
- Have never given birth or have had trouble getting pregnant.
- Have endometriosis (a condition where tissue from the lining of the uterus grows elsewhere in the body).

If you have one or more of these factors, it does not mean you will get ovarian cancer. But you should speak with your doctor about your risk.

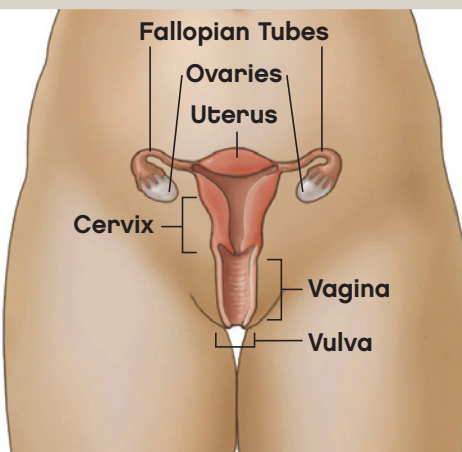
## Who gets ovarian cancer?

All women are at risk for ovarian cancer, but older women are more likely to get the disease than younger women. About 90 percent of women who get ovarian cancer are older than 40, with the greatest number being age 55 or older.

In 2005,\* 19,842 women were told that they had ovarian cancer, making it the second most common gynecologic cancer.† Ovarian cancer causes more deaths than any other gynecologic cancer, but it accounts for only about 3 percent of all cancers in women.

\* The most recent year for which statistics are currently available.

† U.S. Cancer Statistics Working Group. United States Cancer Statistics: 1999–2005 Incidence and Mortality Web-based Report. Atlanta (GA): Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and National Cancer Institute; 2009.



## What are the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer often causes signs and symptoms. See your doctor, nurse, or other health care professional if you have any of these signs every day for two weeks or longer and they are not normal for you, especially if they get worse:

- Pain in the pelvic or abdominal area (the area below your stomach and in between your hip bones).
- Back pain.
- Being tired all the time.
- Bloating, which is when the area below your stomach swells or feels full.
- A change in your bathroom habits, such as having to pass urine very badly or very often.
- An upset stomach or heartburn.
- Discharge from your vagina that is not normal for you.

Also, see your doctor if you have any bleeding from your vagina that is not normal for you, particularly if you are past menopause. These symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to see your doctor. Treatment is most effective when ovarian cancer is found and treated early.

## How can I prevent ovarian cancer?

There is no known way to prevent ovarian cancer. But these things may lower your chance of getting ovarian cancer:

- Having used birth control pills for more than five years.
- Having had a tubal ligation (getting your tubes tied), both ovaries removed, or hysterectomy (an operation in which the uterus, and sometimes the cervix, is removed).
- Having given birth.

## Are there tests that can find ovarian cancer early?

There is no simple and reliable way to test for ovarian cancer in women who do not have any signs or symptoms. The Pap test does not check for ovarian cancer. However, here are steps you can take:

- Pay attention to your body, and know what is normal for you.
- If you notice any changes in your body that are not normal for you and could be a sign of ovarian cancer, talk to your doctor about them and ask about possible causes, such as ovarian cancer.
- Ask your doctor if you should have a test, such as a rectovaginal pelvic exam, a transvaginal ultrasound, or a CA-125 blood test if:
  - You have any unexplained signs or symptoms of ovarian cancer. These tests sometimes help find or rule out ovarian cancer.
  - You have had breast, uterine, or colorectal cancer; or a close relative has had ovarian cancer.

## What should I do if my doctor says I have ovarian cancer?

If your doctor says that you have ovarian cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist—a doctor who has been trained to treat cancers like this. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.



## Where can I find more information about ovarian cancer?

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** 1-800-CDC-INFO or [www.cdc.gov/cancer](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer)

**National Cancer Institute:** 1-800-4-CANCER or [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

*CDC Publication #99-9124, Revised March 2009*

