detecting ovarian cancer
know what to look for

CANCER RESEARCH UK
Ovarian cancer facts

This leaflet is about ovarian cancer, its symptoms and the things that affect your risk of getting the disease.

Ovarian cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women in the UK, and mainly affects older women.

When ovarian cancer is found early, it is easier to treat and there is a better chance of survival. If you have any of the symptoms mentioned in this leaflet, and they last for several weeks, you should see your doctor.

How common is it?

Around one woman in every 50 will develop ovarian cancer over her lifetime. It mainly affects older women – more than four out of five cases are in women over 50.
The ovaries

The ovaries are part of the female reproductive system. There is one located on each side of a woman's lower abdomen. Each is about the size and shape of an almond.

Thousands of eggs are stored inside the ovaries. Each month an egg is released for a possible pregnancy.

The ovaries also produce hormones which control monthly menstrual cycles.
What is ovarian cancer?

The ovaries are made up of millions of cells. Some of these cells make hormones, some surround the eggs as they develop, and others make up the outside layer of the ovary.

Cancer develops when any one of these cells starts to multiply out of control, forming a tumour. Most ovarian cancers start in cells in the outside layer of the ovary.

Why is early detection important?

Finding cancer at an early stage gives a better chance of being treated successfully. In the early stages of ovarian cancer, cancer cells will only exist within the ovaries. At later stages, cancer cells can spread to other parts of the body such as the bowel, liver or lung, making it harder to treat.

Seven in ten people survive ovarian cancer if it is detected at an early stage. But at present, only one in five cases is diagnosed at this stage. That’s why it’s important to know what to look out for, and not to ignore any symptoms.
What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

Many women with ovarian cancer notice changes to their body, particularly in the abdominal area. The symptoms are often vague and non-specific, but they shouldn’t be dismissed. These symptoms include:

- bloating or unusual feeling of fullness in the abdomen
- pain or discomfort in the abdomen or lower back
- passing urine more often than usual
- constipation

These symptoms are usually caused by problems that are much less serious than ovarian cancer, so try not to worry.

If you have any of these symptoms and they don’t clear up after several weeks, make sure you see your doctor. The most important thing is to be aware of what is normal for you, and if you notice any changes, do get them checked out.
What affects your risk?

Age
Age is the biggest risk factor for ovarian cancer. As a woman gets older, her risk of developing ovarian cancer increases. There are a number of other things that affect your risk.

What increases your risk?

HRT
Using hormone replacement therapy (HRT) increases the risk of ovarian cancer, but only while you’re still taking it.

Obesity
Obesity may increase the risk of ovarian cancer.

Family history
Women with a family history of ovarian or breast cancer may have an increased risk of ovarian cancer.

What reduces your risk?

Having children
The more children a woman has, the lower her risk of ovarian cancer.

Breastfeeding
Women who breastfed their children have a lower risk of ovarian cancer.

The Pill
Oral contraceptives significantly reduce the chance of developing ovarian cancer, both while you’re taking them and long after you stop. The Pill slightly increases the risk of breast cancer, but only while you’re still taking it.
More about family history

About one woman in ten who develops ovarian cancer is known to have inherited a damaged gene that runs in her family.

You may have an increased risk of developing ovarian cancer if:

- two or more members of your family had ovarian cancer and they are first-degree relatives of each other (mother, sister or daughter)
- one member of your family had ovarian cancer at any age, and their mother, sister or daughter had breast cancer before the age of 50.

These are two of the main criteria, but it is very complicated. If you think you may have a family history of ovarian cancer, ask your doctor for more information and advice.

Testing for ovarian cancer

Although women in the UK can be screened for breast, cervical and bowel cancer, there is no national screening programme for ovarian cancer. This is because tests are not yet reliable enough. Cancer Research UK is helping to support a screening trial, one of the largest ever carried out.

Women who have a family history of ovarian or breast cancer may be offered regular checkups for ovarian cancer. These examinations can help find the disease earlier, when it is easier to treat. They involve blood tests and ultrasound scans.
Further information

For more about ovarian cancer visit our patient information website www.cancerhelp.org.uk click on 'specific cancers' then 'ovarian cancer'.

If you want to talk in confidence about cancer, call our information nurses. Direct line 020 7061 8355 or freephone 0800 CANCER, that is 0800 226 237.

Order copies of this and other cancer awareness leaflets online at www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets or call 020 7061 8333.

About Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK is the world’s leading independent organisation dedicated to finding out how to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. If you would like to support our work please call 020 7121 6699 or visit our website.

Cancer Research UK
PO Box 123
London WC2A 3PX

www.cancerresearchuk.org
www.cancerhelp.org.uk

June 2007

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