What increases your risk?

Age
As a woman gets older, her risk of developing ovarian cancer increases.

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

Obesity (being very overweight)
Being very overweight 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.

The Pill
Oral contraceptives significantly reduce the chance of developing ovarian cancer, both while you are taking them and long after you stop. Taking the Pill slightly increases the risk of breast cancer, but only while you are still taking it.

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

More about family history
About one woman in 10 who develops ovarian cancer is known to have been born with a faulty gene that runs in her family. But having relatives with ovarian cancer does not always mean you have a faulty gene.

If more than one of your very close relatives – such as your mother, sister or daughter – has had ovarian cancer or breast cancer, you may be at increased risk of ovarian cancer. If these relatives were under 50 when they were diagnosed with cancer, then it is more likely that you have a faulty gene.

If you think you may have a family history of ovarian cancer, ask your doctor for more information and advice.

Further information

For more about 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 on freephone 0808 800 4040.

Our health messages are based on scientific evidence. Find out more at www.cancerresearchuk.org/health

You can order our full range of leaflets free online at www.cancerresearchuk.org/leaflets

About Cancer Research UK
Cancer Research UK is the world’s leading charity 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 www.cancerresearchuk.org

Together we will beat cancer
The ovaries
The ovaries are part of the female reproductive system. There is one located on each side of a woman’s lower tummy. Each ovary 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 10 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 is why it is 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 around their tummy area. These changes can include:
- pelvic or tummy pain
- increased tummy size
- bloating that does not go away
- difficulty eating or feeling full quickly.

Lots of women experience symptoms similar to these and usually they are nothing serious. But you should see your doctor if they:
- happen again and again – several times a month
- are new for you – you first noticed them in the last few months.

Other symptoms to look out for are changes in bowel habit, passing urine more often than usual, bleeding after the menopause, extreme tiredness or back pain. The most important thing is to be aware of what is normal for you so you can spot any new changes, and get them checked out early.