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Ovarian Cancer

What is ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer happens when cells that are not normal grow in one or both of your ovaries. This topic is about epithelial ovarian cancer, the most common type.

This cancer is often cured when it is caught early. But most of the time, the cancer has already spread by the time it is found.

It is frightening to hear that you or someone you love may have ovarian cancer. It may help to talk with your doctor or join a support group to deal with your feelings.

What causes ovarian cancer?

We do not know what causes it. Some women who have it also have a family history of cancer. But most do not.

Some women are more likely than others to get this rare cancer. Women who are past menopause or who have never been pregnant are more likely to get ovarian cancer.

What are the symptoms?

Ovarian cancer does not usually cause symptoms at first. But most women do have some symptoms in the 6 to 12 months before ovarian cancer is found. The most common symptoms are gas and pain or swelling in the belly. Other symptoms are diarrhea or constipation, or an upset stomach.

But these symptoms are so general that they are more likely to be blamed on a number of other causes. Most of the time, the cancer has already spread by the time it is found.

How is ovarian cancer diagnosed?

Sometimes the doctor may feel a lump in or on an ovary during a routine pelvic exam. Often a lump may be seen during an ultrasound. Most lumps are not cancer.

The only way to know for sure that a woman has ovarian cancer is with biopsies taken during surgery. The doctor makes an incision in the belly so that he or she can look inside. The doctor will remove bits of any tumors that are found and send them to a lab to confirm that they contain cancer.

There is a blood test called CA-125 (cancer antigen 125) that is sometimes done to look for cancer in women at high risk. So far, there is not enough proof to show that this test works to find ovarian cancer early in most women. Too much CA-125 in the blood can be caused by many

things, like the menstrual cycle, endometriosis, and uterine fibroids, as well as many types of cancer.

How is it treated?

Surgery is the main treatment. The doctor will remove any tumors that he or she can see. This usually means taking out one or both ovaries. It may also mean taking out the fallopian tubes and uterus. After surgery, most women have several months of chemotherapy, which means taking drugs that kill cancer cells.

This cancer often comes back after treatment. So you will need regular checkups for the rest of your life. If your cancer does come back, treatment may help you feel better and live longer.

Ovarian cancer is very serious, but many women do survive it. It depends on your age and overall health, how far the cancer has spread, and how much cancer is left behind during surgery.

It may help to talk to other women who are going through the same thing. People who take part in support groups usually feel better, sleep better, and feel more like eating. Your doctor or your local branch of the American Cancer Society can help you find a support group. You can also look on the Internet to find support sites where women with this cancer can talk to each other.

What are your chances of getting ovarian cancer?

This cancer most often affects women who are past menopause. Women are more likely to get ovarian cancer if others in their family have had it. They are more likely to get it if they have had breast cancer.

You may also be more likely to get this cancer if:

- You never had a baby.
- You started menstrual cycles before age 12 and went through menopause after age 50.
- You are unable to become pregnant.
- You have used hormone replacement therapy for menopause symptoms.