

Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



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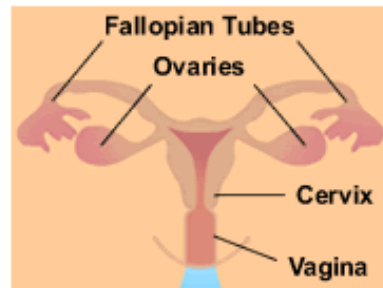


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Health Tip: Detecting Ovarian Cancer, the "Silent Killer"

The White House issued a proclamation designating this September as National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. Today's Health Tip will answer some commonly asked questions regarding screening and detection of ovarian cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, women diagnosed in the earliest stages of ovarian cancer have a five-year survival rate of nearly 93 percent. Unfortunately, only 19% of ovarian cancers are found at an early stage, before they have spread outside the ovary. As a result of this delay in diagnosis, ovarian cancer ranks fifth in cancer deaths among women.



What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

Historically, ovarian cancer has been called the "silent killer" because symptoms often became apparent so late in the process that chances of a cure were poor. Recent medical studies show that characteristic symptoms often do exist for ovarian cancer, even in the early stages. These symptoms include:

- Vague but persistent and unexplained gastrointestinal complaints such as gas, nausea and indigestion
- Abdominal bloating, pelvic or abdominal pain and or feeling of fullness
- Unexplained changes in bowel habits (constipation or diarrhea)
- Frequency and/or urgency of urination
- Unexplained weight gain or loss
- Trouble eating or feeling full quickly
- New or unexplained postmenopausal vaginal bleeding

It should be noted that these symptoms are fairly common and, in fact, are usually not caused by ovarian cancer. When symptoms such as these are persistent, or when they do not resolve with normal interventions (like diet change, exercise, laxatives, rest), however, it is important to undergo evaluation by a physician.

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How is ovarian cancer usually found? Ovarian cancer is usually diagnosed after: 1) finding an ovarian mass during a regular health exam, 2) reporting symptoms or signs suggestive of ovarian cancer to the doctor, or 3) performing screening tests. Unfortunately, each of these methods has shortcomings and none of them has been shown conclusively to be of sufficient accuracy to consistently detect ovarian cancer at an early stage. For example, most early ovarian tumors are difficult or impossible for even the most skilled examiner to feel. Also, when ovarian cancer is of sufficient size to detect on physical exam, it has usually progressed to an advanced stage. When ovarian cancer is suspected, either from symptoms or physical examination, additional testing, such as a transvaginal sonogram and CA-125 blood test, is needed.

Can ovarian cancer be prevented? Like heart disease, there are known risk factors for the development of ovarian cancer. Some of these, such as one's age (most ovarian cancers develop after menopause) or the presence of certain gene mutations, are beyond anyone's control. Mutations of genes BRCA1 or BRCA2 impose a lifetime ovarian cancer risk between 40% and 50%, as well as predisposing women to breast cancer. On the other side are the modifiable risk factors that can reduce a woman's risk of developing ovarian cancer. These include: 1) maintaining an ideal body/mass index, 2) taking progesterone along with estrogen (in women with intact ovaries who require hormone replacement), and 3) receiving genetic screening if you have a strong family history of ovarian cancer. A study from the American Cancer Society found that obesity is a significant risk factor for ovarian cancer. The risk for ovarian cancer was increased by 50% in the heaviest women.



Are tests available to screen for ovarian cancer? Screening tests used for detection of ovarian cancer include transvaginal sonography and a blood test known as CA-125. The transvaginal sonogram is a special type of ultrasound done with a vaginal probe that obtains more accurate images of the ovaries than the more typical pelvic ultrasound. CA-125 is a protein in the blood

that has been noted to be elevated in many women with ovarian cancer. There are problems, however, with using these tests to screen for ovarian cancer. Transvaginal ultrasound can find a mass on the ovaries, but cannot determine if that mass is cancer or something less dangerous. Also, conditions other than ovarian cancer can raise CA-125 levels in the blood and in some cases women with ovarian cancer may still have normal CA-125 levels. Women with a very high risk for the development of ovarian cancer, such as those with a positive BRCA1 or 2 gene, probably do benefit from screening with these tests. Use of these tests to screen healthy women with no signs or symptoms of ovarian cancer is currently not recommended.

What does the future hold? Scientists at the National Cancer Institute are studying using the combination of ultrasound and CA-125 levels as a way to get more accurate results from the screening tests. Others are investigating completely new methods of early detection like tumor markers, antibodies, and other tests. Hopefully, a test of similar quality to the Pap test, used to screen for cervical cancer, will be available in the future. For now, the best measures available for early detection of ovarian cancer appear to be regular physician examinations and reporting pelvic or abdominal symptoms so that additional testing can be done if necessary.

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