

2007 Health Bulletin

Cooperative Extension Service

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(Health Education through Extension Leadership) Staff

Ovarian Cancer: Awareness is the First Step to Prevention

Ovarian cancer is the fourth leading cause of cancer death in the U.S. and in Kentucky. This is a highly treatable disease if found early, unfortunately only 25% of all ovarian cancers are detected early. Increasing public awareness is one of the most important first steps in preventing this “silent killer” of women.

What is ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells are found in the ovary. There are three main types of ovarian cancer, named for where they are located. The types of ovarian cancer are: epithelial cell, germ cell, and stromal cell. Epithelial cells cover the surface of the ovary. Approximately 80 to 95% of all ovarian cancers start in the epithelial cells, making this the most common type of ovarian cancer. Germ cells are the cells that form eggs inside the ovary. Stromal cells make up the ovary and produce the female hormones.

What are the risk factors for ovarian cancer?

Family history

- Risk is higher for women who have a mother, sister, or daughter who have been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.
- Risk increases if two or more relatives (mother, sister, or daughter) have been diagnosed with ovarian cancer.
- Risk is higher for women who have a family history of breast or colon cancer.

Note: Having a family history of ovarian cancer is the most common risk factor for the disease.

Advancing age

- Risk increases with age.
- Nearly one half of all ovarian cancers are found in women age 63 and older.

Obesity

- Risk is 50% greater in women who are obese

Reproductive history

- Risk is greater in women who had their first period before age 12.
- Risk is greater in women who have never born a child.
- Risk is greater in women who had their first child after age 30.
- Risk is greater in women who entered menopause late (after age 52).
- Risk is greater in women who used fertility drugs.

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What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

Early symptoms

- Back pain
- Fatigue
- Feeling bloated
- Loss of appetite and/or feeling full after eating only a few bites of food.
- Gas
- Indigestion
- Nausea
- Constipation
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pain
- Urinary frequency and/or urgency

Late symptoms

- Abdominal swelling
- Increased abdominal pain
- Pelvic pain
- Unexplained vaginal bleeding
- Leg pain
- Shortness of breath

Generally symptoms of ovarian cancer are very vague, making this disease the “silent killer”. In most cases women with ovarian cancer have two or more of these symptoms. Early symptoms become increasingly worse as the cancer progresses.

Keep in mind these symptoms can be related to other illnesses, only your health care provider can make the diagnosis of ovarian cancer!

How can I prevent ovarian cancer?

Increasing your awareness about ovarian cancer through learning the symptoms and risk factors is one of the most important prevention tools.

Other prevention includes:

- Know your family history.
- Eat a healthy diet which includes fruits and vegetables.
- Eat a diet low in saturated fat.
- Educate other family members and friends about ovarian cancer.
- Discuss risk factors with your health care provider



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For more information on health issues in Kentucky, please visit: www.ca.uky.edu/HEEL

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