

September 2004 Health Bulletin

This publication compiled and edited by the H.E.E.L. Program
(Health Education through Extension Leadership) Staff

SEPTEMBER IS OVARIAN CANCER AWARENESS MONTH

OVARIAN CANCER FACTS:

The American Cancer Society estimates that about 25,580 new cases of **ovarian cancer** will be diagnosed in the United States during 2004. Ovarian cancer causes more deaths than any other type of cancer affecting the female reproductive system. It accounts for 5% of all cancer deaths among women.¹

Among U.S. women, ovarian cancer is the 7th most common cancer. Ovarian cancer is ranked as the **4th most common type of cancer among women in the United States and in Kentucky.**² Ovarian cancer incidence varies by region with portions of Western Kentucky having the lowest statewide incidence rate and portions of Eastern Kentucky having the highest.³

The good news is that the ovarian cancer incidence rate (new cases/100,000 women) has decreased since 1991. About 25% of ovarian cancer can be treated successfully if detected early. When ovarian cancer is found early and at a localized stage, about 90% of patients live longer than 5 years after diagnosis.

Ovarian Cancer: Who's at Risk?

Doctors do not know what causes ovarian cancer. However, they do know that women over the age of 50 have ovarian cancer more than women under 50, and that white women tend to have ovarian cancer more often than other groups of women. A **risk factor** is anything that increases your chances of getting a disease such as cancer. Different diseases have different risk factors. Most women with ovarian cancer do not have any known risk factors. **It is important to know that not having any risk factors will not guarantee that you will not have the disease.** Only a small number of women who have risk factors will actually develop ovarian cancer.

Studies show that the following risk factors may increase the chance of developing this disease:

- **Family history.** Your risk of ovarian cancer is increased if your mother, daughter, or sister (**known as first-degree relatives**) have, or have had, ovarian cancer, especially if they developed it at a young age. The risk is even higher two or more first-degree relatives have had the disease. You can inherit the risk if the disease has occurred on your mother's or father's side of the family. Also, a family history of breast or colon cancer is associated with an increased risk of developing ovarian cancer.
- **Age.** The likelihood of developing ovarian cancer increases as a woman gets older. Most ovarian cancers occur in women over the age of 50, with the highest risk in women over 60.
- **Childbearing.** Women who have **never** had children are more likely to develop ovarian cancer than women who have had children. The more children a woman has had, the less likely she is to develop ovarian cancer.
- **Personal history.** Women who have had breast or colon cancer may have a greater chance of developing ovarian cancer than women who have not had breast or colon cancer.
- **Fertility drugs.** Research has found that drugs that cause a woman to ovulate may slightly increase a woman's chance of developing ovarian cancer. Infertility has been shown to increase the risk of ovarian cancer even without the use of fertility drugs.
- **Talc.** Some studies suggest that women who have used talc in the genital area for many years may be at increased risk of developing ovarian cancer.
- **Hormone replacement therapy (HRT).** Some evidence suggests that women who use HRT after menopause may have a slightly increased risk of developing ovarian cancer.

UK
UNIVERSITY
OF KENTUCKY
Health Education
through
Extension Leadership

Getting Tested

There is no easy test to check for ovarian cancer like a mammogram for breast cancer or a pap smear for cervical cancer. Regular physicals, pelvic exams, and an awareness of symptoms are important. Your routine pelvic examination can find some reproductive cancers at an early stage, but most ovarian cancers are difficult or impossible for the most skilled physician to find during this exam. If ovarian cancer is found from a pap smear many times the disease is advanced.

SEE A DOCTOR IF YOU HAVE SYMPTOMS!

To help find the cause of these symptoms, the following tests could include:

Laboratory tests:

- CA-125 (Cancer antigen 125) measures a protein in the blood that is elevated in about 80% of certain ovarian cancer types.

Non-Laboratory tests:

- Ultrasound (trans-vaginal and/or pelvic) which uses sound waves to create a picture of the uterus and ovaries
- CT Scan (computerized tomography)
- X-Ray of the GI tract

Reducing Your Risk

As we learn more about what causes ovarian cancer, we may also learn how to reduce the chance of getting this disease. Some studies have shown that breast feeding and taking birth control pills (oral contraceptives) may decrease a woman's likelihood of developing ovarian cancer. Studies suggest that reducing the number of ovulations during a woman's lifetime may lower the risk of ovarian cancer.

Women who have had an operation that prevents pregnancy (*tubal ligation*) or have had their uterus and cervix removed (*hysterectomy*) also have a lower risk of developing ovarian cancer. In addition, some evidence suggests that reducing the amount of fat in your diet may lower the risk of ovarian cancer.

Recognizing Symptoms

Ovarian cancer often shows no obvious signs or symptoms until late in its development. Signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer may include:

- General abdominal discomfort and/or pain (gas, indigestion, pressure, swelling, bloating, cramps)
- Nausea, diarrhea, constipation, or frequent urination
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling of fullness even after a light meal
- Weight gain or loss with no known reason
- Abnormal bleeding from the vagina

These symptoms may be caused by ovarian cancer or by other, less serious conditions. It is important to check with a doctor if you have any of these symptoms.



Remember, the most significant risk factor for ovarian cancer is a family history of the disease.

- ☞ The **University of Kentucky Ovarian Cancer Screening** program provides **FREE** screenings to qualified women. For more information on this program, call **1-800-766-8279**.
- ☞ The **University of Louisville Ovarian Cancer Screening** program provides **FREE** screenings to qualified women. For more information on this program, call **(502) 629-2491**.
- ☞ For further information concerning ovarian cancer please call the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service **1-800-4-CANCER**.

SOURCES:

- ¹The American Cancer Society
- ²Ovarian Awareness of Kentucky
- ³Kentucky Cancer Registry
- National Cancer Institute
- The National Women's Health Information Center
www.4woman.gov
- CDC Ovarian Cancer Control Initiative
www.cdc.gov/cancer/ovarian/about.htm
- Women's Cancer Network