

All about Ovarian Cancer



Ovarian cancer is a form of cancer that begins in the ovaries, the female reproductive organs responsible for producing eggs and hormones such as oestrogen and progesterone.

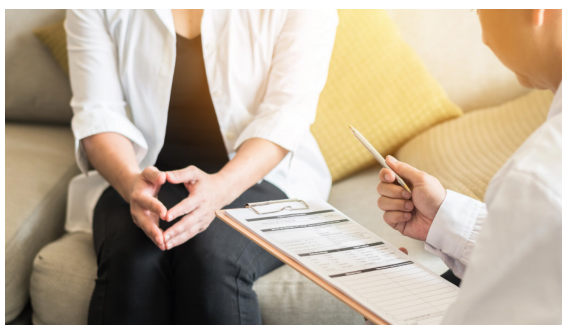
Often referred to as the "silent killer," symptoms of ovarian cancer can frequently be confused with those of other conditions. In 2023, over 1,200 individuals were diagnosed with ovarian cancer, with the average age of diagnosis being 64.

There are three main types of ovarian cancer:

- **Epithelial Ovarian Cancer:** This is the most common type of the cancer, originating from the cells on the surface of the ovary.
- **Germ Cell Tumours:** This type of tumour develops from the cells that produce eggs. It also tends to be rarer, often affecting younger women.
- **Sex Cord-Stromal Tumours:** This variation is found in ovarian connective tissues and may result in the production of hormones that affect the body in various ways.

Learn more:

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/ovarian-cancer/about/what-is-ovarian-cancer.html>



There are several causes and risk factors that can lead to ovarian cancer.

- **Genetics:** A family history of ovarian, breast, or colorectal cancer can increase the risk of developing ovarian cancer. In particular, mutations in the **BRCA1** and **BRCA2** genes have been linked to ovarian cancer cases.
- **Age:** Early onset of menstruation (before age 12) and delayed menopause are both considered risk factors for developing ovarian cancer.
- **Reproductive History:** Having children later in life or not having children may also increase one's risk of contracting ovarian cancer.
- **Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT):** The long-term use of HRT has been associated with a higher risk of developing ovarian cancer.
- **Endometriosis:** This is a condition where uterine tissue grows elsewhere in the body, and it has been connected to increasing risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Read more: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ovarian-cancer/causes/>

Symptoms

Symptoms of ovarian cancer can often be easily overlooked. They include:

- Abdominal bloating or swelling
- Pelvic pain or discomfort
- Menstrual abnormalities
- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly
- Changes in bowel or urinary habits
- Unexplained weight loss or gain

Since these symptoms are commonly observed in other conditions, ovarian cancer frequently goes undetected until it reaches a more advanced stage.



Diagnosis

Diagnosing ovarian cancer typically involves a combination of clinical evaluation, imaging studies, and laboratory tests.

- **Pelvic Examination:** This is a physical exam conducted to check for abnormalities.
- **Imaging Tests:** Ultrasound, CT scans, or MRIs are used to provide doctors with images of the ovaries.
- **Blood Tests:** Drawing blood allows for the detection of CA-125, a protein that tends to be elevated in individuals with ovarian cancer. However, it is also not specific to ovarian cancer and can be elevated in other circumstances.
- **Biopsy:** Tissue samples are taken and then examined thoroughly for cancer cells.
- **PET scans:** This measure involves a radioactive tracer that is then injected into the bloodstream to create detailed images of organs and tissue function.

Early detection and diagnosis are crucial for effective treatment of ovarian cancer, making timely evaluation and intervention essential. When ovarian cancer is suspected, assembling a multidisciplinary team of healthcare experts is essential to create a tailored diagnostic and treatment plan.

Stages of Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer can be classified into four stages, based on how far the condition has spread:

- Stage I: Cancer is confined to the ovaries.
- Stage II: Cancer has spread to other organs within the pelvis.
- Stage III: Cancer has spread to the abdomen and/or lymph nodes.
- Stage IV: Cancer has spread to distant organs, such as the liver or lungs.

Ovarian cancer staging uses two systems, the FIGO and AJCC TNM, which essentially function the same way to assess the following details:

1. **Tumour Size (T):** Examining the size of the tumour can determine if the cancer has spread beyond the ovaries to nearby organs such as the uterus or bladder.
2. **Lymph Node Involvement (N):** Assesses whether the cancer has spread to nearby lymph nodes in the pelvis or around the aorta.
3. **Distant Metastasis (M):** Indicates whether the cancer has extended to other parts of the body, such as the lungs, liver, or bones.

For more information see: <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/diagnosis-staging/staging>



Treatment

Treating ovarian cancer depends on several factors, including the cancer type, the patient's overall health, personal preferences, and the disease stage. Treatment typically involves a combination of surgery, chemotherapy, targeted therapy and, in rare cases, radiation therapy.

- **Surgery:** This is the primary treatment offered, typically involving the removal of one or both ovaries, the uterus, and possibly nearby lymph nodes and tissues.
- **Chemotherapy:** This involves the use of drugs to kill cancer cells and stop them from growing. It's usually given to the patient after surgery to target any remaining cancer cells.
- **Targeted Therapy:** This treatment focuses on specific molecules involved in cancer growth and spread.
- **Hormone Therapy:** This type of therapy can be used to treat hormone sensitive ovarian cancer

Read more:

<https://cancer.org.au/cancer-information/types-of-cancer/ovarian-cancer/after-a-diagnosis-of-ovarian-cancer>

Prognosis

The prognosis varies based on the cancer's stage, the specific type of cancer, and its responsiveness to treatment. Ovarian cancer diagnosed at an early stage generally has a more favourable prognosis than when detected at advanced stages.

Prevention and Screening

There is no standard screening test for ovarian cancer. However, for those at high risk (e.g., individuals with a BRCA mutation or a strong family history), doctors may recommend more frequent pelvic exams, transvaginal ultrasounds, or blood tests. Preventative measures also include:

- **Prophylactic Surgery:** Involves the removal of the ovaries and sometimes even the uterus in women at very high risk.
- **Birth Control Pills:** Some studies suggest that taking oral contraceptives may reduce the risk of ovarian cancer.

Living with Ovarian Cancer:

Living with ovarian cancer means addressing both the physical and emotional challenges of the disease. Here are some key considerations:

1. **Medical Management:** Stick to your treatment plan, which may involve surgery, chemotherapy, or targeted therapies. Work with your healthcare team to manage any side effects.
2. **Emotional Support:** Seek mental health support and connect with support networks to help with emotional well-being.
3. **Lifestyle Adjustments:** Maintain a balanced diet, engage in moderate exercise, and manage work and financial concerns.
4. **Long-Term Care:** Regular follow-ups and a survivorship care plan are crucial for monitoring recurrence and managing long-term effects of the disease.
5. **Quality of Life:** Focus on your personal goals and hobbies. It is important to consider palliative care if this will enhance your comfort and quality of life.

A comprehensive approach to care is essential for maintaining well-being and managing the challenges of living with ovarian cancer.

Remember! Coping with ovarian cancer is challenging, but maintaining hope and perseverance can assist in overcoming obstacles that you may encounter.

More References:

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/ovarian-cancer/about/what-is-ovarian-cancer.html>
<https://medlineplus.gov/ovariancancer.html>
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ovarian-cancer/>