

What Is Ovarian Cancer?

Description of ovarian cancer and how it develops.

The ovaries are two small organs located on either side of the uterus (womb), deep within the pelvic cavity. The ovaries produce female hormones and store egg cells, which when fertilized by a sperm cell can result in pregnancy. Ovarian cancer begins when cells in the ovary lose the normal constraints upon their growth.

What causes ovarian cancer?

The cause of ovarian cancer is not yet understood. Several theories have been proposed to explain how the disease occurs.

- According to one theory, repeated uninterrupted ovulation causes the surfaces of the ovaries to undergo cellular changes that lead to the development of cancer.

Blood Test for Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer strikes about 21,000 women in the United States each year. Of those, about 15,000 die from the disease. Early ovarian cancer is often silent, meaning there are no symptoms. There is no specific test to screen for ovarian cancer in the general population. But researchers are studying different diagnostic tests to try to catch ovarian cancer early.

One test, called CA-125, is sometimes used for women who are at a high risk or suspected of having ovarian cancer. A doctor may order this as well as other tests, including pelvic exam, ultrasound, CT scans or MRI when ovarian cancer is suspected. Some women with ovarian cancer have higher levels of CA-125 in their blood, but others do not.

What is a CA-125 test?

This is a blood test that measures the amount of the protein CA-125 in the blood. CA-125 is called a tumor marker because its level is often higher in people with certain types of cancer, including ovarian cancer. It can also be elevated in other types of cancer such as cancer of the lung, colon, pancreas, uterus or lymph nodes.

Having a high level of CA-125 does not mean by itself that

- Another theory surmises that increased levels of pituitary hormones, not cellular changes, are responsible for the cancer.
- Still another theory speculates that alterations in blood flow to the ovaries play a role in cancer development.

Who gets ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer is diagnosed in more than 20,000 women in the United States each year. It's the fifth-leading cause of cancer death among American women and has the highest death rate of all gynecological cancers. An estimated one in 55 women who reach ages 75 to 79 will develop ovarian cancer during her lifetime.

The average age of a woman diagnosed with ovarian cancer is 61. According to statistics made available by the National Institutes of Health, in the past decade there has been a 30 percent increase in the number of cases of ovarian cancer and an 18 percent increase in the number of deaths attributable to ovarian cancer.

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you have ovarian cancer or any other type of cancer. There are many other reasons why this test may be elevated. These include liver disease, endometriosis, pregnancy, pelvic infections and inflammation of the pancreas. CA-125 can also be elevated in some healthy people.

Can the CA-125 test be used to screen for ovarian cancer?

The CA-125 test is not specific for ovarian cancer, so it is not useful in screening healthy women who are not at an increased risk for having the disease. Doctors are not even sure if it's helpful for women who are at high risk.

How can CA-125 levels be used during treatment for ovarian cancer?

Once treatment for ovarian cancer has been started, CA-125 levels can be very useful. CA-125 levels can:

- Check how well the treatment is working. The CA-125 levels may start to drop if the treatment is successful.
- See if the cancer has come back. Once treatment has been completed, a rise in the CA-125 level may mean that the cancer has come back.

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7 Tips to Reduce Anxiety About Pelvic Exams

If you dread your yearly pelvic exam or Pap test, here are some tips that may help you feel more at ease.

It's safe to say that no woman looks forward to her yearly pelvic exam and Pap test. In fact, many women dread these tests, and some actually avoid them.

Yes, a pelvic exam may be uncomfortable or embarrassing. But annual gynecologic exams are crucial to your health. Consider these facts:

- **Pelvic exams** can help identify many women's health problems. These include uterine cancer, ovarian cancer, infections and sexually transmitted diseases.
- **Pap tests** have cut the number of cervical cancer deaths by 70 percent since they became routine. A Pap test is done during a pelvic exam.

Experts advise that women start having annual pelvic exams and Pap tests within three years of becoming sexually active or at least by age 21. This yearly visit is a good time to discuss birth control or other questions you may have about sexual health.

Seven tips to conquer anxiety about gynecologic exams

If you've been avoiding or putting off your gynecologic exams, try these ways to reduce your anxiety:

1. Find a doctor you feel comfortable with. You can see your family doctor for a pelvic exam and Pap test. Or you can go to a gynecologist, a specialist in women's health. Some women prefer to see a female doctor for gynecologic exams. Finding someone you trust who is easy to talk to is probably the most important factor.

2. Bring a support person. It may help to have a friend or family member go to the appointment with you. This person can be in the room during the exam if you want.

3. Tell your doctor how you feel. Knowing you're worried or embarrassed may help your doctor be more sensitive to your needs. If you've had a bad experience in the past, it may help to share this information.

4. Find out what's going to happen. Before the exam starts, ask your doctor to explain just what he or she is going to do. Don't be afraid to ask questions. You have a right to know. Knowing what to expect may help you feel calmer and more in control.

5. Try to relax. Being tense makes it more likely that the exam will hurt, and it shouldn't. Practice deep breathing and focus on releasing the tension in your muscles. It might help to chat with the doctor or listen to soothing music.

6. Don't worry about how you look. There is no need to shave before your appointment unless it makes you feel more at ease. And don't douche. Douching might actually make it harder to diagnose a problem such as vaginal dryness or worrisome discharge.

7. Remember that these tests are important. Having regular gynecologic exams are one of the best things you can do for your sexual health. They can help safeguard your fertility, prevent the spread of infections and catch cancer early, when it's easiest to cure.

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Know Your Prostate Cancer Risks

Has anyone in your family had prostate cancer? Learn about your risks and when you should get screened.

Most men are offered prostate screening starting at age 50. However, some would benefit from screening at an earlier age. African-Americans, for instance, are nearly twice as likely to develop prostate cancer. A family history of prostate cancer is also a major risk factor. About 10 percent of cases are associated with family history, where the heredity pattern for prostate cancer is between father and son or two brothers. Research implicates specific gene mutations in these families that lead to prostate cancer susceptibility.

Earlier screening

If your brother or father had prostate cancer, your own risk doubles and continues to rise with the number of relatives having the disease. If they developed prostate cancer at a young age, the risk is still higher. For men without any relatives with prostate cancer, screening tests should begin at age 50. For those with a first-degree relative (father or brother) with prostate cancer, doctors offer screening at 45.

The importance of family history

- If your father or brother has prostate cancer, you are more likely to develop the disease six or seven years earlier than men without any history of prostate cancer in the family.
- The more relatives, the higher the risk. Three or more relatives increase the risk by 35 to 45 percent.
- If your father was diagnosed younger than age 60, your risk is about 20 percent greater than the general population.

The prostate gland and screening

The prostate gland sits below the bladder, in front of the rectum and surrounds the urethra (urine tube) that leads into the penis. The prostate turns the semen into a favorable environment for sperm. The screening tests take advantage of the prostate's relatively easy access and one of its products, prostate specific antigen (PSA).

Digital rectal exam (DRE)

The back portion of the prostate is close to the rectum. So a doctor can feel the surface of the prostate by inserting a gloved finger and feeling for lumps or any irregularities on the surface.

Prostate specific antigen (PSA) test

The PSA is a blood test for a protein unique to the prostate gland. Most PSA exists in semen, but a small portion of it is circulating in the blood. If greater than a count of 4, the risk for prostate cancer increases. The "normal" for each man depends on several factors, including age and size of the prostate. An elevated PSA level may also indicate that there is an infection of the prostate (prostatitis). Doctors don't make any decisions based on a single PSA reading, but observe changes in PSA over time. The results help the doctor decide whether a biopsy is necessary to see if there is cancer within the gland.

What you can do

- Know your prostate family history: Who has or had prostate cancer? At what age were they diagnosed?
- Don't panic if you find out there is a family history of prostate cancer. Remember: prostate cancer grows very slowly compared to other kinds of cancer. Thus, if diagnosed early enough prostate cancer can be cured.
- Get screened. The American Cancer Society recommends that men with a family history of prostate cancer be screened at age 45 (usually screening starts at 50).

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Basic Facts About Prostate Cancer

It is the second most common cancer among men.

It is estimated that 234,000 new cases of prostate cancer will be diagnosed in the United States this year. That makes prostate cancer the most common cancer among American men, except for skin cancer. More than 27,000 deaths due to prostate cancer are expected to occur this year.

The good news is that the outlook for men diagnosed with prostate cancer is better than ever. More than half of all prostate cancers are found early, while the tumor is still localized, and the five-year survival rate for these men is 99 percent.

What is the prostate gland, and what does it do?

The prostate is a gland about the size of a walnut that is situated below the urinary bladder and in front of the

rectum. The urethra (a long tube that carries urine out of the body) passes through the prostate.

The prostate gland produces a fluid that serves as the vehicle for sperm. Although there will be implications if the prostate gland is removed, it is not an essential organ and the body can function without it.

Are all prostate tumors cancerous?

Many men, especially as they age, are affected by an overgrowth of prostate tissue. At times, this tissue overgrowth is benign, meaning that the cells do not contain cancer. This prostate condition is called benign prostatic hypertrophy, or BPH. Other times, abnormal cancerous cells characterize the overgrowth of tissue, and this is referred to as a malignancy or cancer of the prostate.

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Prostate Cancer: Hope for the Future

Discovery of a gene; new drugs; vaccines being tested.

Experts are exploring new developments in prostate cancer treatment that may hold hope for the future. These include:

- **HPC1 gene.** Scientists recently discovered a gene called HPC1 that they hope will give additional information about the inherited risk of prostate cancer. One day there may be tests available to identify men at high risk of developing prostate cancer. Early screening procedures could then be implemented.
- **Angiogenesis.** New drugs are being tested that may be able to halt the spread of

prostate cancer by interfering with the tumor's blood supply.

- **Prostate cancer vaccines.** Several types of vaccines that boost the body's immune response to prostate cancer cells are now being tested in clinical research trials.

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