

# What You Should Know About **Ovarian Cancer** in Midlife Women

**O**varian cancer is a deadly disease because it lacks obvious early warning symptoms. It accounts for only 3% of female cancers, but it is the fifth leading cause of all cancer-related deaths in American women. In 2008, 15,520 women died from ovarian cancer in the United States.

Treatment for ovarian cancer is most effective in the earlier stages; however, ovarian cancer is usually not detected until it is at an advanced stage. By the time the cancer is diagnosed, often the tumor has spread beyond the ovaries.

## What are the common symptoms of ovarian cancer?

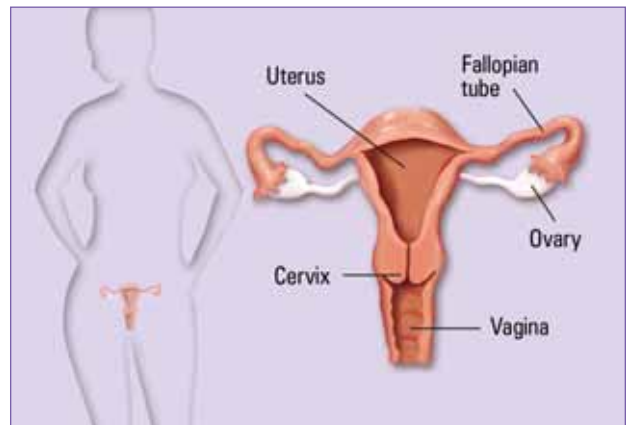
Ovarian cancer symptoms are usually vague. Women and their health care providers often blame the symptoms on other, more common conditions. Yet, in a national survey of ovarian cancer patients, approximately 95% reported that they had symptoms before their diagnosis (particularly abdominal pain, bloating, feeling full sooner than normal while eating, and bladder or bowel problems).

As the cancer grows, a woman may also experience the following: vaginal bleeding (especially postmenopausal) or abnormal vaginal discharge; back pain; or a change in bathroom habits, including intense or frequent need to urinate, constipation, or diarrhea.

Clinicians and patients should pay close attention to symptoms and family history, reserving testing for diagnosis rather than screening purposes. If you notice any changes in your body that are not normal for you and could indicate ovarian cancer, talk to your clinician right away.

## How is ovarian cancer diagnosed?

Routine screening of postmenopausal women with average risk for ovarian cancer is not advised. No satisfactory screening tests are available. A physical or pelvic examination may reveal a swollen abdomen and fluid in the abdominal cavity. Other possible tests include a complete blood panel, a CT scan or MRI of the pelvis or abdomen, and an ultrasound of the pelvis. These are



expensive tests that yield few positive results for most patients. So, only women with a family history of ovarian cancer benefit from regular screening. The Pap test does not screen for ovarian cancer.

## What are the known risk factors for ovarian cancer?

A woman's risk for ovarian cancer is affected by several factors, and it increases with age. Women with a family or personal history of breast, uterine, or ovarian cancer are at increased risk. Obesity is another risk factor.

Women who have never given birth and those who have had endometriosis are also at higher risk.

## How can I prevent ovarian cancer?

There is no known way to prevent ovarian cancer. There is lower ovarian cancer risk in women with a history of pregnancy and breastfeeding; those who have used oral contraceptives; and those who had a tubal ligation (had tubes tied), ovaries removed, or hysterectomy.

For additional information, including treatment options, visit:

- *National Cancer Institute*  
[www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/ovarian](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/ovarian)
- *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*  
[www.cdc.gov/cancer/ovarian/index.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/ovarian/index.htm)