

Ovarian Cancer



How much do you know about ovarian cancer?

Every year, thousands of women in the UK are diagnosed with ovarian cancer. And in many cases, the disease is already at an advanced stage by the time a diagnosis is made.

While not as common as breast cancer, ovarian cancer is difficult to spot early – making it more deadly, even though it is relatively easy to treat if caught in time.

One reason for this is that the lack of a suitable test means there is no official screening programme in place, as there is for other cancers such as cervical cancer.

The aim of [Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month](#) is to increase the survival rate for women with ovarian cancer by helping more of them to recognise the signs before it is too late – both by raising awareness of ovarian cancer symptoms and by funding pioneering research into new screening and treatment methods.

Here's a five-minute round up of what you need to know to protect yourself and/or your loved ones.

! Know your numbers

There are around 7,500 new ovarian cancer cases in the UK every year. That's 21 a day. Worldwide, the number of women diagnosed each year with cancer of this kind is 295,000ⁱ.

What is ovarian cancer?

The ovaries are small, almond-shaped organs that form part of the female reproductive system.

Essentially a repository for the lifetime supply of eggs that women are born with, they are responsible for releasing an egg each month and for producing the female hormones oestrogen and progesterone.

Ovarian cancer, which comes in a range of different forms, is a gynaecological cancer that involves the overproduction of cells in and around these organs or the fallopian tubes that link them to the uterus.

These abnormal cells eventually form growths or tumours that can affect surrounding tissues such as the peritoneum, which covers the abdominal organs, and the bowels.

From there, the cancer can then continue to spread to other parts of the body.

? Did you know?

There are five main types of gynaecological cancer: cervical, uterine, ovarian, vaginal, and vulval. Around 60 women in the UK are diagnosed with one of these cancers every dayⁱⁱ.

What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

It's not always easy to recognise the symptoms of ovarian cancer, not least because they can generally also be linked to other, less serious conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome. So, if in doubt, get checked out.

The main symptoms to look out for are:

- A persistently bloated stomach or abdomen
- A loss of appetite or inability to eat as much as usual
- Pelvic or abdominal pain
- A need to wee more urgently or more often than usual

Women with ovarian cancer also report feeling very tired, losing weight for no reason, and having diarrhoea or constipation.

Why do women develop ovarian cancer?

Unlike many other cancers, ovarian cancer is rarely caused by genetics.

In fact, up to 85% of ovarian cancer cases are "sporadic" or one-off issues that do not increase the likelihood of the patient's female relatives developing cancer of the same kind.

The other 15% to 20% of ovarian cancer cases are believed to be caused by an inherited gene, often a mutated copy of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene that also increases the carrier's risk of developing breast cancer.

Other factors that increase your risk of developing ovarian cancer include:

- **Age** – more than half of ovarian cancer patients are over the age of 65
- **Lifestyle** – being overweight, smoking, and not taking enough exercise can all increase your chances of developing ovarian cancer
- **HRT** – using hormone replacement therapy after the menopause can increase the risk of ovarian cancer
- **Medical history** – certain conditions such as diabetes and endometriosis can make ovarian cancer more likely, as do previous cancers such as breast and bowel cancer

Conversely, research suggests that having children, breast feeding, having a hysterectomy, and taking the combined contraceptive pill can all help to reduce your chances of being diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

? Did you know?

Ovarian cancer is the sixth most common cancer among women in the UK. It kills more than 4,000 women every yearⁱⁱⁱ.

What screening is done for ovarian cancer?

As doctors do not have access to a test that reliably picks up cancer of this kind at an early stage, there is currently no national screening programme for ovarian cancer in the UK.

So, it's up to you to make an appointment to see your GP if you are concerned you may have it.

The [NHS website](#) recommends seeing your GP if:

- You have been feeling bloated, particularly more than 12 times a month
- You have other symptoms of ovarian cancer that will not go away
- You have a family history of ovarian cancer and are worried you may be at a higher risk

Actions they are likely to take as a result of your appointment include carrying out an internal examination to see if there are any swellings or lumps and arranging a blood test to check the level of a protein called CA125, which is a useful indicator of whether or not you have ovarian cancer. Depending on your symptoms, you may also be asked to undergo further tests or be referred to a gynaecological oncologist.

How is ovarian cancer treated?

Ovarian cancer treatment depends on the type of ovarian cancer you have, as well as the stage of the disease at the time it is diagnosed, but generally involves some combination of surgery and chemotherapy.

Where possible, doctors generally prefer to use surgery to remove as much of the cancer as possible before starting chemotherapy. However, chemotherapy is sometimes recommended to shrink the cancer pre surgery and may also be the only option if surgery is deemed too risky.

Other, less common treatments for ovarian cancer include radiotherapy and so-called targeted therapies designed to help prevent cancer growing and spreading.

New treatments are also being tested and developed via clinical trials, which patients can request to take part in if they wish.

Sources

- ⁱ Cancer research UK; <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/ovarian-cancer> and Ovarian Cancer Action; <https://ovarian.org.uk/march-ovarian-cancer-awareness-month/>
- ⁱⁱ Cancer Research UK; <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/ovarian-cancer>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cancer Research UK; <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/health-professional/cancer-statistics/statistics-by-cancer-type/ovarian-cancer>

About the author

Jessica Bown is a freelance writer and journalist.