

# Health Awareness

A County Health Pool Publication



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## Ovarian Cancer Awareness

**R**eceiving a diagnosis of ovarian cancer is difficult and life changing. Fortunately, medical advances have made treatments more effective. Women diagnosed in the earliest stages have a five-year survival rate of nearly 93 percent, according to the American Cancer Society (ACS).

Until recently, ovarian cancer was known as a “silent killer” because it usually wasn’t found until it had spread to other areas of your body. But new evidence shows that most women may have symptoms even in the early stages, and awareness of symptoms may hopefully lead to earlier detection.

### What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of ovarian cancer are nonspecific and mimic those of many other more common conditions, including digestive and bladder disorders. A woman with ovarian cancer may be diagnosed



with another condition before finally learning she has cancer. Common misdiagnoses include irritable bowel syndrome, stress and depression.

The key seems to be persistent or worsening signs and symptoms. With most digestive disorders, symptoms tend to come and go, or they occur in certain situations or after eating certain foods. With ovarian cancer, there’s typically little fluctuation — symptoms are constant and gradually worsen.

Recent studies have shown that women with ovarian cancer are more likely than are other women to consistently experience the following symptoms:

- Abdominal pressure, fullness, swelling or bloating
- Urinary urgency
- Pelvic discomfort or pain

Additional signs and symptoms that women with ovarian cancer may experience include:

- Persistent indigestion, gas or nausea
- Unexplained changes in bowel habits, such as constipation
- Changes in bladder habits, including a frequent need to urinate
- Loss of appetite or quickly feeling full



*(Over)*

## Ovarian Cancer Awareness

(Continued)

- Increased abdominal girth or clothes fitting tighter around your waist
- Pain during intercourse (dyspareunia)
- A persistent lack of energy
- Low back pain
- Changes in menstruation

### Causes of ovarian cancer

Three basic types of ovarian tumors exist, designated by where they form in the ovary. They include:

**Epithelial tumors.** About 85 to 90 percent of ovarian cancers develop in the epithelium, the thin layer of tissue that covers the ovaries, according to the American Cancer Society.

**Germ cell tumors.** These tumors occur in the egg-producing cells of the ovary and generally occur in younger women.

**Stromal tumors.** These tumors develop in the estrogen- and progesterone-producing tissue that holds the ovary together.

The exact cause of ovarian cancer remains unknown. Some researchers believe it has to do with the tissue-repair process that follows the monthly release of an egg

through a tiny tear in an ovarian follicle (ovulation) during a woman's reproductive years. The formation and division of new cells at the rupture site may set up a situation in which genetic errors occur. Others propose that the increased hormone levels before and during ovulation may stimulate the growth of abnormal cells.

### Treatment of ovarian cancer

Treatment of ovarian cancer usually involves a combination of surgery and chemotherapy.

#### Surgery

In most cases, you'll want to have a gynecologic oncologist perform ovarian cancer surgery because they often have more training and experience with this type of operation.

#### Chemotherapy

After surgery, you'll most likely be treated with chemotherapy — drugs designed to kill any remaining cancer cells. The initial regimen for ovarian cancer includes the combination of carboplatin (Paraplatin) and paclitaxel (Taxol) injected into the bloodstream (intravenous administration). Clinical trials have found that this combination is effective, though researchers are continually looking for ways to improve on it.

## Radiation

While a mainstay in the treatment of some other cancers, radiation generally isn't considered effective for ovarian cancer. Sometimes, your doctor may recommend external beam radiation therapy (EBCT) to treat the symptoms of advanced cancer.

### When to see a doctor

See your doctor if you have swelling, bloating, pressure or pain in your abdomen or pelvis that lasts for more than a few weeks. If you've already seen a doctor and received a diagnosis other than ovarian cancer, but you're not getting relief from the treatment, schedule a follow-up visit with your doctor or get a second opinion. Make sure that a pelvic exam is a part of your evaluation.

If you have a history of ovarian cancer or a strong history of breast cancer in your family, strongly consider seeing a doctor trained to detect and care for ovarian cancer patients so that you can talk about screening, genetic testing and treatment options while you are disease-free.

Sources: WebMD.com, and mayoclinic.com

## Benefits Corner

### Announcement

CHP Membership Renewal Meeting will be held at the CTSI offices on Thursday, September 23, 2010 at 10:00 a.m. At that time, the 2011 rates and benefits will be discussed and voted upon by the CHP Board and Membership.