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Women's Health: Ovarian Cancer

Due to the quiet symptoms of ovarian cancer, the disease can be difficult to detect. However, if caught early, it is treatable.

Risk Factors

It is not clear why one woman gets ovarian cancer and another does not. However, some factors increase a woman's risk of developing the most common form of ovarian cancer, called epithelial ovarian cancer:

- **Age**—Ovarian cancer occurs most often in women who are over the age of 55.
- **Family history**—A history of ovarian, uterine, colorectal or breast cancer in a woman's family will increase her chances of getting this disease. This is especially true of women with family members who developed the disease at a young age.
- **Reproductive history**—Some research suggests that the use of certain fertility drugs for longer than one year may increase a woman's chances of getting ovarian cancer, especially if pregnancy is not achieved. Additionally, women who have no children or have their first child after age 25, or who are considered obese may be at an increased risk of ovarian cancer.

There are a few things that may reduce a woman's likelihood of developing ovarian cancer. Research has indicated that the use of oral contraceptives for at least five years throughout your lifetime may decrease the risk of developing ovarian cancer. In addition, studies have shown that women who undergo tubal ligation or a hysterectomy may also have a decreased risk of developing this disease.

Make sure your doctor is aware of any risk factors you may have.

Symptoms

Symptoms of ovarian cancer often do not present themselves until the cancer has already spread. Some symptoms include:

- Feelings of being bloated, or fullness in the pelvic area
- Persistent stomach or pelvic pain
- Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as changes in bowel habits or indigestion
- Back pain
- Feeling full quickly when eating

Detection

Currently, no single test exists that can detect ovarian cancer easily and early, but the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified some recommended detection methods. Having yearly gynecological exams that include pelvic exams and Pap smears is recommended, in addition to annual physical exams, but paying attention to changes in your body is also important in detecting cancer early. While the transvaginal ultrasound and the CA-125 blood test are often used in screening for ovarian cancer, neither has been shown to detect cancer earlier or to lower the deaths caused by ovarian cancer. All women, even those who have had tubal ligations or hysterectomies, should receive thorough annual gynecological exams, according to the CDC.

Treatment

Treatment varies depending on the stage of the disease, but most often includes surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy. If you are diagnosed with ovarian cancer, do some research before deciding on a treatment method.