



**NATIONAL BREAST
CANCER CENTRE**
Incorporating the
Ovarian Cancer Program

FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Answers to frequently asked questions about

Ovarian Cancer

How many women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year in Australia?

Each year approximately 1200 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer in Australia.

How many women die from ovarian cancer each year in Australia?

Each year approximately 800 women die of ovarian cancer in Australia. Over 70% of women are diagnosed at an advanced stage, where the cancer has spread and is very difficult to treat successfully. More than half of the women diagnosed with ovarian cancer will not survive five years after diagnosis.

What are the main risk factors for ovarian cancer?

Increasing age is a well established risk factor for ovarian cancer, with more than 80% of cases occurring in women aged 50 and over.

Hereditary links only appear to account for around 5-10% of all cases. Women with a family history of ovarian cancer are also at increased risk, with the risk increasing the more first degree relatives are affected, but the numbers of women in this category are small. (Women with a family history should consider increased surveillance/referral to a familial cancer clinic).

The other factors that may cause ovarian cancer are unclear.

Are there different types of ovarian cancer?

The four main types of ovarian cancer are: epithelial (which starts on the outer covering of the ovary); borderline (tumours which are not so aggressive as other types of ovarian cancer); germ cell (which begins in the cells that mature into eggs); and sex cord stromal (which starts in the cells that release female hormones).

Around 90% of ovarian cancers are of the epithelial type, with germ cell and sex cord stromal tumours being rare.

Is there any way to prevent ovarian cancer?

In general, there are no preventive strategies for ovarian cancer. There has been a protective effect noted with the use of the oral contraceptive pill, with pregnancy and breast feeding.

How is ovarian cancer detected?

Ovarian cancer is difficult to diagnose at an early stage because early disease can be asymptomatic and symptoms are non-specific. There are currently no accepted methods for population screening or early detection. A Pap smear cannot be used to detect ovarian cancer.

In the absence of a screening test, the most important thing women can do is be aware of the symptoms that may indicate ovarian cancer and if they notice any unusual and persistent changes in their bodies, they should see their GP.

The most common symptoms are:

- ◀ Abdominal bloating/feeling full
- ◀ Appetite loss
- ◀ Unexplained weight gain
- ◀ Constipation
- ◀ Heartburn
- ◀ Back pain
- ◀ Urinary frequency
- ◀ Fatigue
- ◀ Abdominal/pelvic pain

Isn't there a blood test that detects ovarian cancer?

CA125 can detect ovarian cancer but it has limitations. A positive result may be caused by other medical conditions such as endometriosis or ovarian cysts, or even by smoking and caffeine consumption. It is not recommended as a stand-alone test for ovarian cancer.

What is the usual treatment for ovarian cancer?

The type of treatment depends on the stage of ovarian cancer but most women will have surgery as the first line of treatment, followed by chemotherapy and in some circumstances radiation therapy is used.

OVARIAN CANCER RESOURCES

*Clinical practice guidelines
for the management of women with epithelial ovarian cancer*

*Epithelial ovarian cancer: understanding your diagnosis and
treatment (a guide for women diagnosed with ovarian cancer)*

To order, call the **NBCC** on **1800 624 973**

or order or download a copy from

www.ovariancancerprogram.org.au

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