

Women's Health

What is ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer is the cancer of the ovaries. Ovarian cancers can largely be categorised into:

- epithelial ovarian cancers (cancers that arise from the skin or surface of the ovary). This is the most common type and occurs between the ages of 60-80. 90% of ovarian cancers are of this type.
- Stromal cancers (cancers that arise from the supportive tissue of the ovary).
- Germ cell cancers (cancers that arise from the cells that eventually form eggs). Germ cell tumors tend to occur in young women in the second decade of life, these would be the kind of cancers that would occur in an 18 year old. Stromal and germ cell cancers comprise the other 10% of ovarian cancers.

How common is ovarian cancer among women (in terms of frequency)? How many women suffer from it currently, and how many suffered from it five years ago? Is there an upward trend in numbers?

The latest report by the Singapore Cancer Registry (2002-2006) shows ovarian cancer to be the 4th most common cancer among Singaporean women. The Crude Rate is 14.3 per 100,000. This is up from the previous report by the Singapore Cancer Registry that put the rate at 13.3 per 100,000. There is certainly an upward trend with regards to the incidence of ovarian cancer in Singaporean women. The gynecologic cancer profile in Singaporean women certainly reflects Singapore's attainment of first world status. From 1968-2002 the top 3 most common gynecologic cancers were cervix, uterus, ovary. From 2002-2006, the rankings changed to ovary, uterus, cervix which is the profile that is exhibited in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

What is the trend like in terms of ages of patients?

The age of incidence remains largely unchanged. Most ovarian cancers are of the epithelial type and occur in mostly between the ages of 60-80.

Why are younger women getting ovarian cancer?

There are tumors and cancers that tend to affect or are found more commonly in younger women. As mentioned above, Germ cell tumors are the most common ovarian cancers in young women. These cancers tend to affect only one ovary and are very responsive to chemotherapy. This makes the decision to keep the other normal ovary and the uterus easier for gynecologic cancer surgeons. Otherwise, the standard surgical treatment of epithelial ovarian cancer is removal of both ovaries and the uterus.

How should these younger women guard themselves against ovarian cancer?

One possible option for young women to reduce their risk of ovarian cancer, may be the use of oral contraceptive pills. Studies suggest that women who use oral contraceptive pills may have a lower risk of developing ovarian cancer, the latest study published in the British medical journal, The Lancet. The investigators concluded,

“Use of oral contraceptives confers long-term protection against ovarian cancer. These findings suggest that oral contraceptives have already prevented some 200 000 ovarian cancers and 100 000 deaths from the disease, and that over the next few decades the number of cancers prevented will rise to at least 30 000 per year.”

~The Lancet, Volume 371, Issue 9609, Pages 303 - 314, 26 January 2008

This may be important, because there is currently no method to detect ovarian cancer early, there is no effective screening method for ovarian cancer like say for cervical cancer where cancer can be effectively prevented by getting a simple pap smear test. Ovarian cancer results in the most deaths of all the gynecologic cancers because it is a silent disease and symptoms only develop in late stage disease after it has spread widely.

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What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

There are no symptoms in early ovarian cancer. Late stage ovarian cancer usually presents with abdominal bloating, a feeling of fullness and loss of appetite, changes in bowel habits, persistent nausea and abdominal pain and discomfort.

What are the possible treatment options?

Although ovarian cancer usually is detected late, it is treatable. Treatment consists of surgery to remove all the tumor and cancer, this usually involves removal of the uterus, Fallopian tubes and ovaries, the omentum which is a web of fat in the abdomen and the appendix together with all visible tumor in the abdomen. Surgery is usually followed shortly by chemotherapy which is given every three weeks for up to six treatments.

What are the chances of recovery?

Epithelial ovarian cancer and especially germ cell tumors respond very well to surgery and chemotherapy. The problem with ovarian cancer is its tendency to recur even after successful treatment. With current medications and technology, we are able to treat recurrent ovarian cancer with increasing success.

Which profiles of females are more likely to get ovarian cancer?

The following women will have a higher risk for epithelial ovarian cancer:

- Women who start having their menstrual periods early and have a late menopause.
- Women who have never breastfed.
- Women who have never been pregnant.

What are the chances of being able to reproduce again?

The ability to have a family after treatment for ovarian cancer depends on the kind of treatment. If at least one ovary is preserved and the uterus with it and the patient is young, there is a good likelihood of being able to get pregnant and having a normal baby. Since epithelial ovarian cancer typically affects women after the years during which they can conceive, this is usually not an issue. However, when treating germ cell tumor patients, who tend to be young or in the case of Ms Deborah Wong, who is a YOUNG patient with epithelial ovarian cancer, then the surgical treatment will tend to lean towards being conservative with attempts to preserve as much of the ovary and uterus as possible.

Ms Wong's treatments were groundbreaking in that we were able to use a combination of surgery and chemotherapy to preserve normal portions of both ovaries and all of the uterus and Fallopian tubes despite her having an epithelial ovarian cancer.