



DISEASE FACT SHEET

Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian Cancer

The ovaries are two small almond-shaped organs of the female reproductive system that are located at either side of the uterus. They are responsible for producing ova (or eggs) and the hormones that are responsible for fertility and menstruation.

Ovarian cancer is the eighth most common cancer in Australian women and the sixth most common cause of cancer death. Every year, around 1300 Australian women are diagnosed with this disease. Due to the lack of adequate screening techniques and non-specific symptoms, most women are diagnosed in the advanced stages of the cancer, meaning that the survival rates of ovarian cancer are low in comparison to other cancers, such as breast cancer. Sadly, around 80% of women diagnosed with advanced stage ovarian cancer will die within five years of their diagnosis.

What is ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer occurs when the normal division and growth of ovarian cells is disrupted, leading to an uncontrollable build up of cells. These abnormal cells may also spread to nearby tissues or organs. The cause of ovarian cancer is unknown.

There are four main types of ovarian cancer each classified by the type of ovarian cells affected:

1. Epithelial ovarian cancers are derived from cells covering the surface of the ovary and comprise over 90% of ovarian cancers. Unfortunately, they also tend to be the most aggressive.
2. Borderline cancers are a less aggressive and less common type of epithelial ovarian cancer.
3. Germ cell ovarian cancers arise from the eggs within the ovary. This type of cancer is uncommon, and tends to occur in women under 30 years of age. It generally responds well to treatment, and young women may still be able to have children afterwards if only one ovary is affected.
4. Sex-cord stromal ovarian cancers originate from the tissue that releases female hormones. These are uncommon and can occur at any age.

How is it diagnosed?

Ovarian cancer is often a silent disease in the early stages, which means many women have no symptoms. If symptoms do appear, they are vague and include swelling and pain in the abdomen; changes in usual menstrual pattern or postmenopausal bleeding; gastrointestinal symptoms such as heartburn, nausea and bloating; changes in bowel habits, such as constipation and diarrhoea; tiredness and appetite loss; and unexplained weight loss or weight gain. If you experience these symptoms for more than 3-4 weeks, see your doctor.

Unlike the Pap smear test, which tests for cervical cancer before symptoms appear, there is no screening test for ovarian cancer. The Pap smear test does not detect ovarian cancer.

A transvaginal ultrasound is the best way to diagnose ovarian cancer. In this test, the ultrasound probe is inserted into the vagina to provide a clear view of the ovaries. If the ultrasound shows an abnormality, the doctor may then do a CA-125 test to further investigate the possibility of ovarian cancer. A surgical biopsy is the only way a definitive diagnosis of ovarian cancer can be made.



“Every year, around 1300 Australian women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer”

“About 19 out of 20 women who develop ovarian cancer do not have a family history of the disease.”

“Overall survival rate five years after diagnosis is approximately 40%.”



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What are the risk factors?

- Age - Ovarian cancer is most common in women aged over 45 years
- Family history - Around 5-10% of ovarian cancers are caused by inheriting a damaged gene. Most hereditary ovarian cancers are associated with the BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes, also associated with familial breast cancers. A small number of hereditary ovarian cancers are associated with a particular type of familial colorectal (bowel) cancer

Women who ovulate less appear to be somewhat protected. Therefore, risk factors include:

- Having few or no children
- Early commencement of menstruation or late menopause
- Having a first child after the age of 30

The long-term use of a combined oral contraceptive pill and breastfeeding lowers the risk of developing ovarian cancer.

How is ovarian cancer treated?

The type of treatment depends on the age of the woman, the type of ovarian cancer, and its stage of progress. The most common treatment method is an individualised combination of surgery and chemotherapy. During surgery, either a portion of the ovary or the entire ovary may be removed. If the cancer has spread to surrounding areas, these affected organs may also have to be removed. After surgery, chemotherapy is used to kill any remaining cancer cells.

What research is Garvan doing in this area?

The Garvan Institute is home to one of the largest cancer research programs in Australia with a focus on hormone-based cancers. Apart from ovarian cancer, we also conduct research into breast, prostate, pancreatic, colorectal (bowel), bladder and lung cancers.

The ovarian cancer research team works very closely with ovarian cancer specialists at the Gynaecological Cancer Centre at the Royal Hospital for Women, Randwick. Together they are investigating genetic factors involved in the development and progression of ovarian cancer, a prerequisite to identifying new markers for ovarian cancer detection and treatment.

Ultimately, the results of our research will be used to develop early diagnostic tests, individualised treatments, and a better prognosis for ovarian cancer sufferers.

Further sources of information

GO Fund	www.gofund.org.au
The NSW Cancer Council	www.nswcc.org.au
The Ovarian Cancer Program	www.ovariancancerprogram.org.au

Garvan Institute of Medical Research – how you can get involved

The Garvan Institute of Medical Research was founded in 1963. Initially a research department of St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, it is now one of Australia's largest medical research institutions with approximately 400 scientists, students and support staff. Garvan's main research programs are: Cancer, Diabetes & Obesity, Arthritis & Immunology, Osteoporosis, and Neuroscience.

Your support makes it possible for the Garvan scientists to continue their great work. You can help by making a donation or a bequest, holding a community fundraiser or volunteering your time for Garvan. For details on how to get involved, please visit www.garvan.org.au or contact our Supporter Services Manager on (02) 9295 8110.

Education is one of Garvan's top priorities. Our Public Awareness and Community Education (PACE) Manager can visit your community group or school to give a talk on a number of science and health related topics. Garvan also offers regular tours of our facilities. For further details, visit our website or call our PACE Manager on (02) 9295 8108.

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