

Ovarian Cancer

September is *National Ovarian Cancer* awareness month and a good time to be reminded of this cancer which is often called the “silent killer”. It earned that reputation because the symptoms are vague until the disease is advanced and has progressed beyond the ovaries where it originates. The symptoms are related to pressure from the ovarian tumor on other organs in the abdomen. Pain low in the abdomen, weight loss, an increase in the waistline, pelvic pressure, and low back discomfort are early symptoms which may be ignored or attributed to a number of other ailments, including indigestion. As the disease progresses, nausea, a decrease in energy, constipation or diarrhea and painful sexual intercourse may be experienced.

The ovaries have three different kinds of tissue and cancer cells can form in any of these. Each type follows its own pattern and has different degrees of seriousness. Not all ovarian tumors are cancerous. Some are benign and never spread beyond the ovaries.

No definitive screening tests exist. No definite cause has been found. The presence of certain genes, the same ones that increase the chance of developing breast cancer, may also increase a person's risk of developing ovarian cancer. In addition, a family history of uterine, colon, stomach or intestinal cancers may confer a higher risk. The more children a woman has had lessens the risk, as does early pregnancies.

Most treatments consist of surgery to remove the cancerous tumor, followed by chemotherapy, whereby medications, known to kill cancerous cells, are administered into the bloodstream or taken by mouth.

Older women are at highest risk, so don't give up those annual gynecology check-ups.