

Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Month Fact Sheet Commonly Asked Questions

What are gynecologic cancers?

Gynecologic cancers are the uncontrolled growth and spread of abnormal cells originating in the female reproductive organs, including the cervix, ovaries, uterus, fallopian tubes, vagina and vulva.

What causes gynecologic cancers?

Biomedical research has discovered that some classes of genes, called oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes, promote the growth of cancer. You can acquire abnormal function of these genes during life (e.g., through smoking, aging, environmental influences) or you can inherit gene mutations from your parents or grandparents. In one instance – cervical cancer – cancer is caused by a sexually transmitted virus.

Can gynecologic cancers be prevented?

Diet, exercise and lifestyle choices play a significant role in the prevention of cancer. Additionally, knowing your family history can increase your chance of early diagnosis and can help you take action toward prevention. Screening and self-examinations conducted regularly can result in the detection of certain types of gynecologic cancers in their earlier stages, when treatment is more likely to be successful and a complete cure is a possibility.

Who should treat gynecologic cancers?

Gynecologic cancers should be treated by a cancer specialist, such as a gynecologic oncologist. A gynecologic oncologist is a board-certified obstetrician/gynecologist who has an additional three to four years of specialized training in treating gynecologic cancers from an American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology-approved program. This subspecialty program provides training in the biology and pathology of gynecologic cancers, as well as in all forms of treatment for these diseases, including surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and experimental treatments.

How are gynecologic cancers treated?

Gynecologic cancers are treated by using one or more of the following options: surgery, radiation therapy, chemotherapy and experimental treatments. The choice of therapy depends on the type and stage of the cancer.

Who is at risk?

Any woman is at risk for developing a gynecologic cancer. Each year, approximately 82,550 women in the United States are diagnosed with cancers affecting the reproductive organs.¹

¹ American Cancer Society. Cancer Facts & Figures, 2004. Available at: http://www.cancer.org/docroot/STT/stt_0.asp. Accessed January 29, 2004.

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Types of Gynecologic Cancers

OVARIAN CANCER

Ovarian cancer, the most serious of the gynecologic malignancies, usually arises on the surface of the ovary.

Symptoms: Changes or discomforts, such as a pressure or fullness in the pelvis, abdominal bleeding, or changes in bowel and bladder patterns, which are constant and progressive.

Risk factors: The risk of ovarian cancer increases with age, especially around the time of menopause. A family history of ovarian cancer is one of the most important risk factors. Infertility and not bearing children are also risk factors. Pregnancy can decrease the risk of developing ovarian cancer.

**Ovarian cancer ranks fifth as a cause of cancer deaths among women, and causes more deaths than any other cancer of the female reproductive system. It is estimated there will be more than 25,000 new cases diagnosed and approximately 16,000 deaths from ovarian cancer in the United States during 2004.*

UTERINE CANCER

Most uterine cancers begin in the lining of the uterus (endometrium) after menopause, when a woman's menstrual cycle ends and the endometrium flattens out. Uterine cancer occurs when cells in the endometrium lining grow out of control and invade the muscle of the uterus.

Symptoms: Warning signs include any bleeding after menopause, or irregular vaginal bleeding before menopause.

Risk factors: Risk factors include obesity, hypertension, diabetes, inappropriate estrogen use, tamoxifen use and late menopause. Women who have not been pregnant also have a slightly higher risk for uterine cancer.

**Cancer of the endometrium is the most common cancer of the female reproductive organs. It is estimated that 40,320 new cases will be diagnosed and approximately 7,000 deaths from uterine cancer in 2004.*

CERVICAL CANCER

Cervical cancer is caused by abnormal cellular changes in the cervix and is the only gynecologic cancer that can be prevented by regular cervical cancer screening.

Symptoms: Bleeding after intercourse, excessive discharge and abnormal bleeding between periods.

Risk factors: Failure to receive regular examinations often eliminates the opportunity for early diagnosis through cervical cancer screening. Persistent high-risk HPV infection has been shown to be the cause of virtually all cervical cancers, though other risk factors include smoking, HIV infection, and early age of first intercourse.

** An estimated 10,520 cases of invasive cervical cancer are expected to be diagnosed and approximately 3,900 deaths in 2004. During 1992-1996, cervical cancer mortality rates declined on average about 2.1 percent per year in the United States.*

VULVAR CANCER

Vulvar cancer appears as lesions on the surface of the vulva or labia.

Symptoms: Itching in the vulvar area.

Risk factors: Risk factors include diabetes, advanced stage (age 70 and older) and chronic vulvar irritation. Women with HPV are also at risk.

**This is a very curable type of cancer, usually with surgical removal of the vulvar lesions and the groin lymph nodes.*

VAGINAL CANCER

Vaginal cancer is very rare. It is usually diagnosed in elderly women with abnormal bleeding and treated with radiation.

FALLOPIAN TUBES CANCER

Cancer will rarely develop in the fallopian tubes. Treatments and risk factors for fallopian tube cancer are similar to ovarian cancer.