

Ovarian Cancer

The Health Column

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This week across Australia many pharmacies will be taking part in activities for Teal Ribbon Day, the culmination of a month of awareness-raising campaigns about ovarian cancer.

Ovarian cancer is a disease where some of the cells in one or both ovaries start to grow abnormally and develop into cancer.

According to the Ovarian Cancer website (www.ovariancancer.net.au), we don't know the causes of most ovarian cancer but research into the causes of this disease is continuing in Australia and overseas.

We do know, however, that there are some factors that may increase a woman's risk of developing ovarian cancer and that there are some protective factors that may reduce a woman's risk.

It is important to know that many women who develop ovarian cancer do not have any known risk factors — while many women who do have risk factors never develop ovarian cancer.

One risk factor is age with ovarian cancer most common in women over the age of 50 and in women who have stopped menstruating (those that have been through menopause). While the risk increases with age, ovarian cancer can affect women of all ages.

Genetics and family history also play a part for some women. If a woman has two or more relatives from the same side of her family affected by ovarian, or ovarian and breast cancer her risk of developing ovarian cancer may be increased. This tends to be a result of an inherited faulty gene (BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation) that increases a woman's risk of developing ovarian and breast cancer.

Genetics and family history are responsible for at least 15% of ovarian cancers. All women diagnosed with ovarian cancer are recommended to attend a familial cancer centre to consider genetic testing.

Women who have not had children, are unable to have children, have never used oral contraceptives or have had children over the age of 30, may be slightly more at risk. This is due to ovaries not having a "rest" from the break and repair of the surface of the ovary when women ovulate each month.

Other risk factors include endometriosis - a condition where the tissue lining the uterus (endometrium) is also found outside of the uterus, lifestyle factors: such as smoking tobacco,

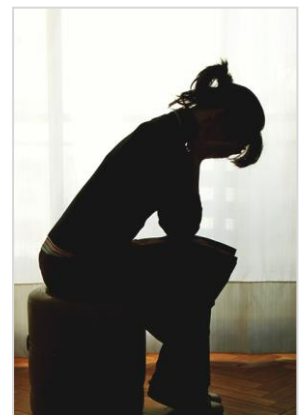


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being overweight or eating a high fat diet, and hormonal factors: including early puberty (menstruating before 12) or late menopause (onset after 50).

Non conclusive risk factors that are also looked at include the fact that women who are using oestrogen only hormone replacement therapy may have a slightly increased risk of developing ovarian cancer.

Also, multiple exposures to fertility drugs and genital contact with talcum or asbestos, which are sometimes used in talcum powders, douches and condoms (this is highly controversial and not proven) may be a risk factor.

Treatment for ovarian cancer usually involves a combination of surgery and chemotherapy. Less often, treatment may include radiotherapy. The type of treatment women receive depends on the type and stage of their ovarian cancer and their general health.

Treatment is best managed by a gynaecological oncologist who is a specialist in treating cancers of the reproductive tract and has very specialised surgical skills.

Ovarian Cancer Australia strongly recommends that women are treated by a gynaecological oncologist. Ideally, they will be part of a multidisciplinary healthcare team — where each member of the team specialises in a different area of care and that care is coordinated between each member. For more information you can download the multidisciplinary care information sheet.

The Directory of Gynaecological Oncology Services provides a listing of treatment centres in each state and territory. The directory shows what types of services are available at each centre (such as specialist nurses, psychosocial care and the opportunity to participate in clinical trials) and includes contact details.

Your local pharmacist can also help with general health advice and your community pharmacy is your health destination. As well, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia has produced a wide range of health fact cards available from all pharmacies around Australia providing the PSA Self Care health information. For the nearest location log onto the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder, or phone 1300 369 772.