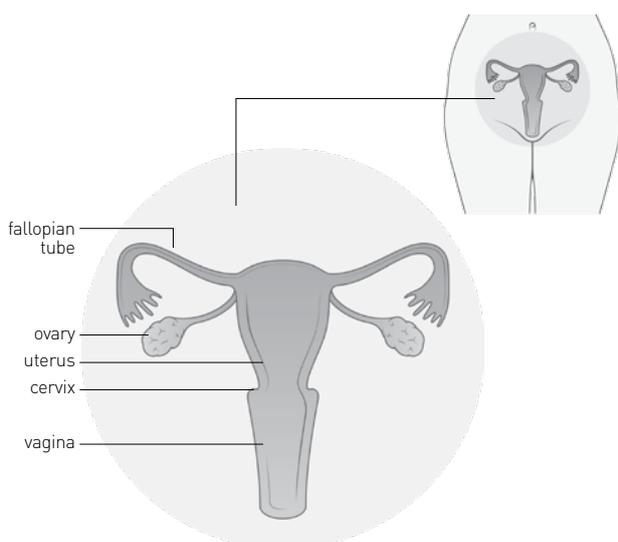




This fact sheet is for women who have been told they have ovarian cancer or are worried they do. It explains what ovarian cancer is, some of its symptoms and ways to treat it.

If you are concerned about symptoms it is important that you see your nurse, doctor or gynaecologist (specialist in women's health). It may be that your symptoms are not related to cancer, but it is important to have all symptoms checked.

The ovaries are small organs that make female hormones and eggs. Women usually have two ovaries, one on each side of their uterus or womb. Before menopause, your ovaries release an egg each month into your uterus which either passes out of your vagina with your period or grows into a baby if fertilised.



Around 3 in 100 Australian women who have cancer will have this kind of cancer. Each year, about 1300 Australian women find out they have ovarian cancer.

What causes ovarian cancer?

Usually it's not possible to say what causes cancer in a particular woman. There are things that women with ovarian cancer have in common though. These are known as risk factors and they suggest that you are more likely to have ovarian cancer if:

- you are older (most women with ovarian cancer are over 50)
- you have never had children
- you have several close blood relatives who have had ovarian, breast, endometrial or colorectal cancer
- you have inherited a faulty gene (like BRCA1 or BRCA2)
- you have Lynch syndrome (or hereditary non-polyposis colorectal cancer – HNPCC).

Some research also suggests that ovarian cancer may have some connection to:

- endometriosis
- long-term hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- cigarette smoking
- obesity.

Other research suggests that many ovarian cancers actually start in the fallopian tubes.

What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

It can be difficult to diagnose ovarian cancer because its signs are often similar to the signs of many other everyday health problems.

Symptoms can include:

- swelling in your abdomen (or tummy)
- pain in your abdomen and back
- lost appetite or feeling full quickly
- needing to wee often or urgently as well as other changes to your toilet patterns, such as changes to your bowel habits
- weight loss or gain that is hard to understand or explain
- indigestion or heartburn
- tiredness.

See your doctor if any of these symptoms persist and are unusual for you.

What should I do if I think I have ovarian cancer?

- See your doctor, nurse or gynaecologist.
- Talk to them about any changes to your body that you have noticed.
- Let them know if you or anyone in your family has had cancer or been tested for genetic faults.

They will most likely:

- ask you questions about the history of your health
- examine your pelvis by pushing on the outside of your abdomen and putting two fingers inside your vagina to feel the shape, size and position of your ovaries and other pelvic organs
- do a blood test
- arrange for an MRI or CT scan of your abdomen and pelvis.

If the results are suspicious of ovarian cancer you will be referred to a gynaecologic oncologist. Please remember only 10–30 per cent of women will be ultimately diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Depending on the results of these tests the usual recommendation is to have an operation called a **laparotomy**. In this operation, a cut is made in your abdomen so the surgeon can look at the organs in your abdomen and pelvis. If they find cancer, they will start treatment straight away by removing any cancer they can (as discussed below). Sometimes doctors will recommend that a sample of fluid (abdominal paracentesis) or tissue (core biopsy) – possibly from the ovary – is taken and tested to determine what is the best treatment for you.

All of these tests can tell us more about your cancer, so that you can be given the best kind of treatment for the particular cancer you have.

How is ovarian cancer treated?

The kind of treatment you have (and its success) will depend on:

- the size of the cancer and how far it has spread (stage of cancer)
- how quickly it is growing and how different it looks to normal cells (grade of cancer)
- where in the ovaries it started (type of cancer)
- your age, health and medical history.

At the Women's a team of specialists (known as the **gynaecological oncology multi-disciplinary team**) will discuss these things and determine the best possible treatment for your particular cancer, lifestyle and wishes. Treatment usually involves a combination of surgery and chemotherapy.

- **Surgery** to remove one or both of your ovaries (known as an **oophorectomy**). Your uterus and cervix may also be removed (known as a **total hysterectomy**) as well as your fallopian tubes, some of the nearby **lymph nodes** (which filter and trap disease) and your **omentum** (the fatty tissue that covers the organs in your abdomen). These operations are sometimes done immediately after cancer is diagnosed during a **laparotomy**.

If the cancer has spread to other parts of the abdomen further surgery may be considered to remove these areas. For example, part of your bowel may need to be removed.

Otherwise you and your doctor will discuss further treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

- **Chemotherapy** is medication that aims to control or kill the cancer. Usually this involves being connected to an IV or drip for a couple of hours so the medication can be released slowly into your body.
- **Radiotherapy** is rarely used in the treatment of ovarian cancer.
- **Hormonal therapy** to block the hormones that can help cancer to grow. This is sometimes used after initial treatment is completed.

Who can I talk to?

The word 'cancer' causes a great deal of fear in people. It can help to get support to manage the fear. Close friends and family may be a good starting place but there are also professional counsellors who can support you through the cancer journey.

If you are a patient at the Women's, the gynae-oncology team (which includes nurses, doctors, psychologists and social workers) will provide counselling and practical support. If you are not a patient at the Women's, BreaCan and the Victorian Cancer Council can put you in touch with experts in this area and other women who have also had cancer.

Things to remember

- If you notice any changes to your body, talk to your nurse, doctor or gynaecologist.
- Your treatment and its success will depend on the stage, grade and type of your cancer, as well as your health.
- You are not alone – it is normal to feel many different things including fear and anger.

Questions to ask your nurse, doctor or gynaecologist

- How big is my cancer and where exactly is it?
- Is my daughter more likely to have ovarian cancer if I have?
- What if I still want to have children?
- Will treatment stop my periods and start menopause?
- What are the side effects of the treatment you are recommending?
- Why is the treatment you are recommending best for me?
- How often will I need to have checkups?
- What will my abdomen look like after treatment?
- Will I still be able to have sex?
- Can you write down what you have told me so that I can read it again later?

Where to get more information or support

If you are a patient at the Women's

Gynaecological Oncology Unit
Royal Women's Hospital
Tel: (03) 8345 3566

For women in Victoria

Women's Welcome Centre

Royal Women's Hospital
Tel: (03) 8345 3037 or 1800 442 007 (rural callers)
Email: wwcadmin@thewomens.org.au

Cancer Council Helpline

Tel: 13 11 20
Web: www.cancervic.org.au

Counterpart

Tel: 1300 781 500
Web: www.counterpart.org.au

References

National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers, Cancer Australia, www.canceraustralia.gov.au
Ovarian Cancer Australia, www.ovariancancer.net.au
Gynaecological Cancers in Australia: An overview report, AIHW Macmillan Cancer Support, www.macmillan.org.uk