

Ovarian Cancer

What is ovarian cancer?

It is a type of cancer that grows in the ovaries (see picture). The ovaries are small organs on the right and left sides of the uterus (womb). They are about the size of almonds. They store eggs and make the female hormones. Ovarian cancer is hard to detect early because most women don't feel the cancer growing inside them. Even when a woman starts to feel something, it's not clear that it is from the ovaries. That's why in most cases, the cancer has spread by the time anyone knows it's there.

Who gets it?

It can occur at any age. Most cases occur after menopause. It is more common in women who:

- Have family members with ovarian cancer or breast cancer
- Have been taking hormones after menopause for more than five years
- Are overweight

What should I do if I think it might run in my family?

There are tests that can tell if you have the gene for ovarian cancer. Talk to your doctor about getting these tests if:

- A family member had breast cancer or ovarian cancer before age 45
- A family member had breast cancer or ovarian cancer more than one time
- A man in your family had breast cancer

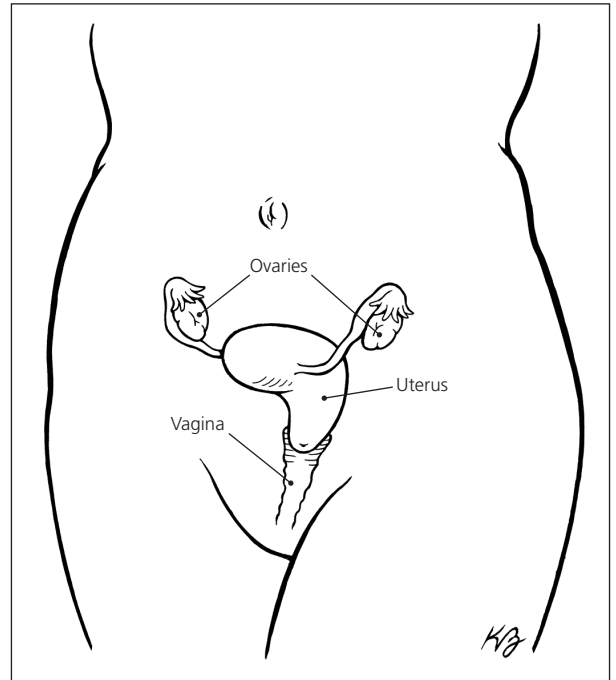


ILLUSTRATION BY KATHRYN BORN

- A family member had breast or ovarian cancer and your family is of European Jewish background

How can I lower my risk of getting it?

To lower your risk of ovarian cancer:

- Don't take hormones for more than a few years after menopause
- Don't use talc powder in the genital area
- Lose weight if you are overweight

Other things that lower your risk are:

- If you need birth control, use birth control pills or shots
- If you have a baby, you should breastfeed



Ovarian Cancer *(continued)*

How do I know if I have it?

It's hard to know. You might have stomach pain, bloating, or problems with your urine. You might also have abnormal vaginal bleeding. If these things happen, it does not mean you have ovarian cancer because they can happen for other reasons. But, you should see your doctor.

Is there any way to find ovarian cancer early before it causes problems?

There is no good way to check for ovarian cancer like we do with colonoscopy or stool tests for colon cancer or Pap smears for cervical cancer. But, if ovarian cancer might run in your family, you should find out about getting tested for the gene.

How is it treated?

The usual treatment is surgery. Chemotherapy is also used for some patients.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

American Cancer Society

1-800-227-2345

<http://www.cancer.org/cancer/ovariancancer/index>

National Cancer Institute

1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/ovarian>

Notes:

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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