

Ovarian cancer is the biggest gynaecological killer of women in the UK women, with the UK survival rates being one of the worst in Europe.

Three quarters of women are diagnosed once the cancer has already spread, making treatment more difficult. Therefore, awareness is so important, to drive forward improvements in diagnosis, treatment and survival.

As ovarian cancer charities in the UK, we are all working to increase awareness of the disease, with women and GPs, in order to save lives.

HOW COMMON IS OVARIAN CANCER?

Ovarian cancer is the fourth most common form of cancer death in women, after breast, lung and bowel cancer. But, the average GP will see only one case of ovarian cancer every five years. Each year in the UK there are approximately

- 7,300 cases of ovarian cancer¹. This is roughly 142 women each week
- 4,100 deaths from ovarian cancer²

SYMPTOMS OF OVARIAN CANCER:

Symptoms are frequent (they usually happen more than 12 times a month) and persistent, and include:

- **Increased abdominal size/persistent bloating (not bloating that comes and goes)**
- **Difficulty eating/feeling full**
- **Pelvic or abdominal pain**
- **Needing to wee more urgently or more often**

Other symptoms can include unexpected weight loss, change in bowel habits, and extreme fatigue. If you regularly experience any of these symptoms, and that's not normal for you, it is important that you see your GP. It is unlikely that your symptoms are caused by a serious problem, but it is important that you get checked.

WHY IS EARLY DIAGNOSIS SO IMPORTANT?

Most women are diagnosed once the cancer has already spread which makes treatment more challenging. The current five-year survival rate for ovarian cancer is 46%. If diagnosed at the earliest stage, up to 90% of women would survive five years or more³. Therefore, early diagnosis is so important.

- Research has shown that just 4% of women in the UK are very confident about recognising a symptom of ovarian cancer⁴
- Delays in diagnosing ovarian cancer are not uncommon. 41% of women reported having to visit their GP 3 times or more before being referred for diagnostic tests⁵

WHAT INCREASES THE RISK OF SOMEONE DEVELOPING OVARIAN CANCER?

The two most important aspects affecting a woman's risk of developing ovarian cancer during her lifetime are age, and family history⁶.

- The risk of ovarian cancer does increase with age, and particularly after the menopause. Most cases will occur in women who have gone through the menopause.
- Most cases of ovarian cancer are 'sporadic' or one offs. This means that close female relatives of someone with ovarian cancer do not necessarily face an increased risk of developing the disease themselves. However, in around one in every ten cases, a family link can be identified. If a woman has two or more close family relatives with a history of ovarian cancer, or ovarian cancer and/or breast cancer then she should discuss her family history with her doctor. Both sides of a woman's family (mother and father) should be considered.

CAN ANYTHING REDUCE THE RISK OF A WOMAN DEVELOPING OVARIAN CANCER?

There are several things which significantly reduce a woman's risk of developing ovarian cancer, but none offer complete protection.

- Having children
- Breastfeeding
- Taking the oral contraceptive pill for several years

CAN OVARIAN CANCER BE CONFUSED WITH OTHER CONDITIONS?

The symptoms of ovarian cancer are often like those of other less serious but more common conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome. However, the increased frequency and persistency of the symptoms are what help to distinguish between ovarian cancer and other conditions. It should be noted that women over the age of 50 rarely develop irritable bowel syndrome, and should a GP think this is the case, they should make sure they have considered other causes such as ovarian cancer⁷.

HOW DOES THE UK'S SURVIVAL RATES FOR OVARIAN CANCER COMPARE TO OTHER COUNTRIES?

England has the lowest survival rate for ovarian cancer in Europe. It is estimated that in the UK, if survival rates matched the best survival rates in Europe, 500 women's lives would be saved every year⁸.

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