



# WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Three Steps To Lowering Risk For Ovarian Cancer Without A Test Or Cure, Education Is Key

(NAPSA)—Constantly in breast cancer's shadow, ovarian cancer is not as commonly discussed or diagnosed, yet remains the fourth most frequent cause of cancer related death among American women. Rarely caught early, the disease may not be detected until it has caused many symptoms and in some cases spread beyond the ovaries to other organs such as the liver, stomach, intestines, bladder, diaphragm, lungs or chest cavity. In all, ovarian cancer sneaks up on one out of every 55 women in the U.S., killing one every 35 minutes. In about the time it takes to drink your morning coffee, another woman has died.

Recent studies illustrate bold advances in treatment. In a study published in *Gynecologic Oncology* by doctors at the Women's Cancer Centers of California, hope was renewed for women in advanced stages of the disease. The study showed that if all visible signs of the cancer are removed via cytoreductive surgery before chemotherapy is performed, survival rates can improve drastically. In addition, advanced chemotherapies are working to prevent cancer recurrence as well as improve current treatment models.

"We're certainly finding ways to improve ovarian cancer treatment, but until we find a cure, women and their doctors need to become better educated," says Scott Eisenkop, M.D., medical director of the Women's Cancer Center, at Encino Tarzana Regional Hospital, CA, who headed the study. "Women and primary care physicians need to be aware of and recognize the symptoms and to quickly involve a specialist."

Luckily, there are steps women can take which may decrease their chances of becoming an ovarian cancer statistic.



### Get an annual vaginal/rectal exam

Kathy Casey, M.D., a gynecological oncologist at the Women's Cancer Centers says, "The myth that a yearly pelvic and rectal exam is only necessary during the reproductive years is absolutely false. Especially for postmenopausal women who are more likely to get epithelial ovarian cancer, regular consultation with your gynecologist is one of the best ways to keep an eye on this disease."

Testing for ovarian cancer is normally not routine at most OB-GYN checkups. Preferred tests may include blood tests, ultrasounds (transvaginal sonography) and physical examinations of the vagina and rectum to detect tenderness and abnormal swelling. However, the only way currently to definitively diagnose ovarian cancer is through minimally invasive surgery involving minor tissue removal.

### Learn the symptoms

While breast cancer may be found with regular exams at home, detecting ovarian cancer is more difficult. Since few women are aware of its subtle signs, the ratio of deaths to new cases for ovarian cancer is an alarming 71

percent, while it is only 27 percent for breast cancer.

Ovarian cancer's symptoms may include:

- Pelvic and/or abdominal pain, discomfort, swelling, bloating, and/or feeling of fullness
- Pain during intercourse
- Unexplained changes in bowel habits
- Frequency and/or urgency of urination in absence of an infection
- Vague, but persistent gastrointestinal upsets such as gas, nausea and indigestion
- Unexplained weight gain or loss, particularly weight gain in the abdominal region
- Ongoing fatigue
- Abnormal postmenopausal bleeding (this symptom is rare)

"Tragically, many ovarian cancer symptoms are often ignored or misdiagnosed as menopause, benign gynecological or gastrointestinal problems," says Maxine Stein, executive director of the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition. "Trust your instincts. If you sense something is wrong, if you have a family history of the disease or you feel more than a minor irritation or persistent symptoms, insist on seeing a gynecological oncologist."

### Get a referral

The most qualified specialist is a gynecological oncologist. According to a recent study, part of the problem in detecting ovarian cancer is that many general medical professionals admit to not feeling up to date on the cancer or its symptoms.

"Ovarian cancer is where breast cancer was 20 years ago before women took it upon themselves to do home self breast exams," says Dr. Casey. "With a little education, we can bridge those years quickly while we work towards a cure."

\* Source: National Ovarian Cancer Coalition

