



What are gynaecological cancers?

Gynaecological cancers are cancers of the female reproductive system and occur when abnormal cells grow in an uncontrolled way.

What are the different types of gynaecological cancer?

Gynaecological cancers are named according to the organ or part of the body where they first develop, including ovary, uterus, cervix, vagina and vulva.

- ▶ **Ovarian cancer**—affects the ovaries, a pair of solid, oval-shaped organs producing hormones and eggs (ova).
- ▶ **Uterine cancer**—begins in the main body of the uterus, a hollow organ about the size and shape of an upside-down pear. The uterus is where the baby grows when a woman is pregnant.
- ▶ **Cervical cancer**—begins in the cervix, the lower, cylinder-shaped part of the uterus. Its upper margin is connected to the uterus, while its lower margin is connected to the vagina.
- ▶ **Vaginal cancer**—begins in the vagina (also called the birth canal), a muscular tube-like channel that extends from the cervix to the external part of the females sex organs (vulva).
- ▶ **Vulval cancer**—begins in the vulva, the outer part of the female reproductive system. It includes the opening of the vagina, the inner and outer lips (also called labia minora and labia majora), the clitoris and the mons pubis (soft, fatty mound of tissue, above the labia).

Other types of gynaecological cancers include fallopian tube cancer and placenta cancer (a pregnancy-related cancer).

What are the symptoms of gynaecological cancer?

The symptoms of gynaecological cancers depend on where the tumour is situated, the size of the tumour and how quickly it is growing. Symptoms that may be caused by gynaecological cancers include:

- ▶ abnormal or persistent vaginal bleeding e.g. bleeding after menopause or that is not part of the menstrual periods, bleeding after sex
- ▶ unusual vaginal discharge
- ▶ pain, pressure or discomfort in the abdomen
- ▶ swelling of the abdomen
- ▶ change in bowel or bladder habits
- ▶ pain during sex
- ▶ itching, burning or soreness
- ▶ lumps, sores or wart-like growths.

There are a number of conditions that may cause these symptoms. If any of these symptoms are experienced, it is important that they are discussed with a doctor.

What are the risk factors for gynaecological cancers?

A risk factor is any factor that is associated with an increased chance of developing a particular health condition, such as gynaecological cancer. There are different types of risk factors, some of which can be modified and some which cannot.

It should be noted that having one or more risk factors does not mean a woman will develop a gynaecological cancer. Many women have at least one risk factor but will never develop a gynaecological cancer, while others with a gynaecological cancer may have had no known risk factors. Even if a woman with a gynaecological cancer has a risk factor, it is usually hard to know how much that risk factor contributed to the development of her disease.



While the causes of many gynaecological cancers are not fully understood, there are a number of factors associated with the risk of developing one or more types of gynaecological cancer. These risk factors include:

- ▶ increasing age
- ▶ having a strong family history
- ▶ identified gene mutations
- ▶ reproductive history such as child-bearing
- ▶ exposure to hormones – produced by the body or taken as medication
- ▶ exposure to diethylstilbestrol (DES) in the womb
- ▶ viral infection such as human papilloma virus (HPV)
- ▶ lifestyle factors such as smoking and those leading to excess body weight.

How are gynaecological cancers diagnosed?

Diagnosis of a gynaecological cancer may involve a number of tests, including:

- ▶ a physical examination, with a pelvic examination
- ▶ a Pap smear
- ▶ blood tests such as a CA125
- ▶ imaging tests – which may include a transvaginal ultrasound or a CT scan, Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) or PET scans may also be suggested
- ▶ taking a sample of tissue (biopsy) for examination under a microscope.

Treatment options

Treatment and care of women with gynaecological cancers is usually provided by a team of health professionals – called a multidisciplinary team.

Treatment for gynaecological cancers depends on the stage and type of the disease, the severity of symptoms and the woman's general health. Treatment often usually involves surgery to remove as much of the tumour as possible, and to determine its stage (how far the cancer may have spread). Radiotherapy, chemotherapy, and hormonal therapies, may also be used.

Research is ongoing to find new ways to diagnose and treat different types of cancer. Some women may be offered the option of participation in a clinical trial to test new ways of treating their gynaecological cancer.

Finding support

People often feel overwhelmed, scared, anxious and upset after a diagnosis of cancer. These are all normal feelings.

Having practical and emotional support during and after diagnosis and treatment for cancer is very important. Support may be available from family and friends, health professionals or special support services.

In addition, State and Territory Cancer Councils provide general information about cancer as well as information on local resources and relevant support groups.

The Cancer Council Helpline can be accessed from anywhere in Australia by calling **13 11 20** for the cost of a local call.

More information about finding support can be found on the Cancer Australia website www.canceraustralia.gov.au

References

1. National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre. Epithelial ovarian cancer. Understanding your diagnosis and treatment. National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre, Surry Hills, NSW, 2008.
2. Abnormal vaginal bleeding in pre-, peri and post-menopausal women. A diagnostic guide for general practitioners and gynaecologists. Cancer Australia, NSW, 2011.

