

# What are Gynecologic Cancers?



**G**ynecologic cancers are cancers of the female reproductive organs (the cervix, uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, vulva, and vagina). The most common are cervical, uterine, and ovarian. Cancers of the fallopian tubes, vulva, and vagina are very rare.

## Who is at risk?

All women are at risk depending on age, family history, and lifestyle.

Risks, warning signs, early detection and prevention are described below.

## Cervical cancer

### *The facts*

- Cervical cancer can be greatly reduced, but not eliminated, by regular Pap test screening.
- A Pap test can detect abnormal cells before they become cancer.
- Most experts believe that cervical cancer is caused by the HPV (wart) virus which is transmitted during intercourse.

### *The risks for cervical cancer increase if ...*

- you do not receive regular Pap tests and pelvic exams
- you or your sex partner have or have had multiple sex partners
- you have a history of genital warts or HPV (human papillomavirus) infection
- you smoke

### *Warning signs*

- Frequently, there are no symptoms.
- If you experience abnormal bleeding (sometimes after intercourse), spotting, or discharge from the vagina, check with your doctor.

### *Early detection*

- Have pelvic exams and Pap tests every one to three years. Specific guidelines:
  - If you are under 30, have a Pap test every two years after having two yearly normal tests.
  - If you are 30 or over, have an HPV/Pap test every three years as long as both tests are negative.

### *Prevention*

- Delay being sexually active.
- Limit the number of sexual partners you have.
- Do not smoke.

## Uterine cancer

### *The facts*

- Uterine cancer begins in the lining of the uterus, the endometrium.
- It is the most common gynecologic cancer.
- It can usually be cured with a hysterectomy.

### *The risks for uterine cancer increase ...*

- with age, especially over age 50
- with obesity, diabetes or high blood pressure
- with estrogen replacement therapy without also taking a progestin (if you have a uterus)
- in women who have not had children
- in women who take tamoxifen

### *Warning signs*

- abnormal vaginal bleeding, spotting or discharge after menopause
- abnormally heavy or prolonged menstrual periods and/or bleeding in between periods in premenopausal women

### *Early detection*

- Have pelvic exams every one to three years.
- Inform your doctor or medical professional if you are experiencing irregular bleeding. (An office procedure called an endometrial biopsy can evaluate the bleeding.)

### *Prevention*

- Eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly to maintain your desirable weight.
- Do not take estrogen alone if you have a uterus.

## Ovarian cancer

### *The facts*

- Ovarian cancer is the second most common gynecologic cancer.
- A women's lifetime risk of developing it from birth to age 85 is approximately 1.5 percent.



- The majority of ovarian cysts are not cancerous.

*The risks for ovarian cancer increase . . .*

- with age, especially after age 60
- with a family history of ovarian cancer\*
- if you have had breast cancer
- in women who have not had children

\*Women from a family suspected of having a rare hereditary ovarian cancer syndrome should consider genetic counseling.

*Warning signs*

- abdominal bloating, swelling and/or pain or a lump
- abnormal vaginal bleeding
- persistent digestive problems including stomach discomfort, gas, nausea

*Early detection*

- There is no proven test to diagnose ovarian cancer in an early stage for women who do not have a family history of ovarian cancer.
- Regular pelvic exams (usually every one to three years) may help.

*Prevention*

- At present, there is no adequate screening test for ovarian cancer.
- Pregnancy and birth control pills use can help prevent ovarian cancer by approximately 50 percent.

## Less common gynecologic cancers

*The facts*

- Cancers of the vulva, vagina, and fallopian tubes are rare and share some of the same risk factors.

*The risks increase . . .*

- with age

- for women with:
  - a history of gynecologic cancer, especially cervical cancer
  - history of genital warts or HPV (human papillomavirus)

*Early detection*

- Have pelvic exams every one to three years.
- Notify your doctor or medical professional of a persistent lesion on the vulva or abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge.

*Prevention*

- Delay onset of sexual activity.
- Limit the number of sexual partners.

## Early detection is your best protection.

Visit your doctor or other health care professional regularly for a pelvic examination which should include a Pap test. Talk to your doctor about any problems, symptoms or changes you have noticed. Do not hesitate to ask any question. It could save your life!

Other important preventive health care measures related to cancer include the following:

- If you smoke, stop!
- Have routine mammograms starting at age 40.\*
- Start routine flexible sigmoidoscopy exams at age 50.\*
- Wear sun screen lotion to prevent skin cancer.
- Limit alcohol intake.

\*Women with a personal or family history of breast or colon cancer should discuss this with their medical professional.

## Other resources

- See your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook* under Women's Health.
- Call the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit the Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department nearest you.
- Visit our Web site at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org)
- The Cancer Information Service 1-800-4-CANCER [www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo](http://www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo)
- The American Cancer Society 1-800-ACS-2345 <http://cancer.org>
- National Ovarian Cancer Coalition 1-888-OVARIAN [www.ovarian.org/](http://www.ovarian.org/)
- National Cervical Cancer Coalition 1-800-685-5531 [www.nccc.online.org](http://www.nccc.online.org)
- Society of Gynecologic Oncologists 1-312-644-6610 [www.sgo.org](http://www.sgo.org)
- Women's Cancer Network 1-312-644-6610 [www.wcn.org](http://www.wcn.org)

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor.