

OVARIAN CANCER - 2006

Ovarian cancer leads to the death of 14,500 American women each year, the most of any gynecologic cancer and the fourth most common cause of female cancer fatality behind lung, breast, and colorectal tumors.

One in seventy women in the United States will develop ovarian cancer during her lifetime and 24,000 receive the diagnosis each year. One in 800 women carried a gene known as BRCA which confers a much higher risk of ovarian and breast cancer. Carriers of this marker account for 5 to 7% of ovarian cancers.

An increased incidence is noted in women who were never pregnant and those with a personal or family history of breast or colon cancer. Childbirth, breast feeding and birth control pill use appear to be protective factors. The role of dietary and environmental factors continues to be investigated.

Ovarian cancer gives no clues that lead to early detection. Symptoms tend to be non-specific such as abdominal discomfort or swelling, fatigue and urinary frequency. Because of its insidious onset, most cases are diagnosed in advanced stages by physician examination, ultrasound and CAT scans. The median age of diagnosis is 61. The mainstays of treatment are major surgery and chemotherapy. The surgery consists of removal of the uterus, fallopian tubes, both ovaries along with other biopsies of abdominal tissues and lymph nodes. Postoperatively, for most patients, 6 courses of chemotherapy are administered at three week intervals. The long term prognosis for early stage disease is

excellent. The majority of women with advanced disease will respond to therapy though relapses are difficult to treat.

Much study is devoted to early detection of ovarian cancer using pelvic examination, ultrasound scans and a blood test called CA-125. Research is underway into the use of newer blood tests for early detection. No screening techniques for the general population have been shown to reduce the death rate from this disease.

For now, a woman may benefit from regular gynecologic care where a careful risk factor assessment can be performed and the possible need for more intense surveillance determined.

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