

Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer is the seventh most common cancer in women and the eighteenth most common cancer worldwide. A quarter of a million women worldwide are diagnosed with this cancer. It has the lowest survival rate, with 140 000 women dying of the disease each year. It is most common in developed countries, where more than eight per hundred thousand women are diagnosed with the disease compared to those in Sub-Saharan African countries with five per hundred thousand.

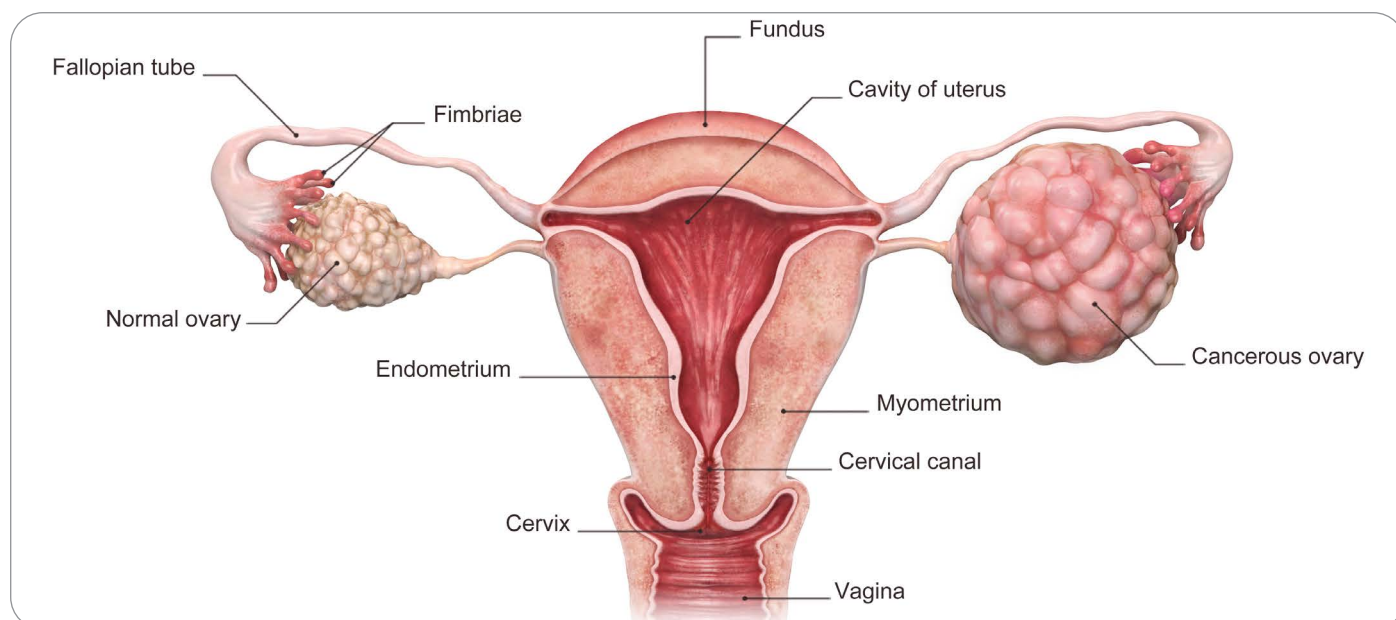


Figure 1: A normal ovary versus one with cancer (Source: St Johns Cancer Institute, 2021)

What is ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer is mainly in the menopausal stage and rarely affects women below 40 years of age. The ovaries are female reproductive organs located in the pelvis, and they produce eggs and the hormones oestrogen and progesterone. Certain cells in the ovary become abnormal and multiply uncontrollably to form a tumour.

Signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer

- **Pelvic and abdominal pain** - Women with early-stage ovarian cancer may experience pain, cramping, or pressure in the pelvic area, abdomen, or stomach. The pain is different from the normal menstrual discomfort.
- **Urination frequency or urgency** – Women may feel

the need to urinate more often, with or without success, or feel as if they always must go.

- **Difficulty eating** – An early warning sign may include feeling full quickly when eating a meal and sensations of being unusually full or bloated afterwards.
- **Bloating** - Ovarian cancer can create gas and obstruct the release of the gas, resulting in abdominal bloating that creates a painful feeling in the abdomen.

Less common ovarian cancer symptoms include:

- **Frequent indigestion** - Heartburn, gas, indigestion, or an upset stomach with no link to food or other common factors could be a sign of a severe medical condition of which ovarian cancer can be one.

- **Lower back pain** - Back pain caused by ovarian cancer ranges from dull pain to pain similar to labour pain. This pain is most often due to tumour growth and the tumour compressing on other structures.
- **Fatigue** - A common symptom of many cancers and other diseases because the body is constantly fighting to destroy it.
- **Pain during sex** – An early warning symptom of ovarian cancer is pain during sex.
- **Constipation** - A growing ovarian tumour can cause constipation and/or diarrhoea by placing pressure on the bowels.
- **Vaginal bleeding** - Bleeding between periods and spotting or bleeding after sexual intercourse need medical attention to rule out ovarian cancer or other pelvic tumours.

Factors that increase the risk of ovarian cancer

- **Age** - Ovarian cancer develops mainly after menopause. Half of the women diagnosed with ovarian cancer are 63 years and older.
- **Obesity** - Women who are obese are at increased risk of developing ovarian cancer.
- **Family history** - Women with a mother, sister, grandmother or aunt who has had ovarian cancer have a higher risk of developing the disease.
- **Previous cancers** - Women diagnosed with breast, colorectal or endometrial cancer have a higher risk of developing ovarian cancer.
- **Reproductive history** - Women may have an increased risk of ovarian cancer if they:
 - Started their menstrual periods much earlier than the average age of about 12
 - Have never given birth to a child
 - Have unexplained infertility (the medical inability to have a child)
 - Have not taken birth control pills
 - Have entered menopause much later than the average age of 51 years.
- **Hormone therapy after menopause** - Women using oestrogen alone or with progesterone after menopause have an increased risk of developing ovarian cancer than women who have never used hormones.
- **Endometriosis** - A disease where tissue inside the uterus grows outside the uterus and is often painful.

How is ovarian cancer diagnosed?

Early detection is critical, as it will improve a woman's chance of survival. There is currently no effective screening test for ovarian cancer. The Pap smear test does not test for ovarian cancer; it screens for cervical cancer.

Should a woman have the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer, her doctor may perform a pelvic exam, a transvaginal or pelvic ultrasound, radiological tests, such as a transvaginal ultrasound or CT scan, and a cancer antigen 125 (CA) 125 blood test. Used individually, these tests are not conclusive; they are most effective when used in combination with each other.

- **Pelvic exam** - The doctor places one or two fingers into a woman's vagina and another over her abdomen to feel the size, shape, and position of the ovaries and the uterus. A pelvic exam seldom detects ovarian cancer, and if it is detected, it usually is in an advanced stage already.
- **Transvaginal ultrasound** – This test is used to examine a woman's reproductive organs and can often reveal if there are tumours or irregularities on the surface of the ovaries.
- **CA 125 blood test** – CA 125 is a substance in the blood that may increase as it is found on most ovarian cancer cells secreted into the bloodstream and can be measured. An increased CA 125 value can occur in both cancers and non-cancerous conditions.
- The only definitive way to determine if a woman has ovarian cancer is through surgery and biopsy, where a tissue sample from the ovary is taken for laboratory analysis. Doctors will perform surgery after enough evidence is gathered from the exam and test results.

How to prevent ovarian cancer

Ovarian cancer cannot be prevented; however, the following are associated with a lower chance of getting ovarian cancer:

- The use of birth control for five or more years.
- Getting your tubes tied (sterilisation), both ovaries removed or a hysterectomy (an operation where the uterus and part of the cervix are removed).
- Breastfeeding for a year or longer.
- Having given birth reduces the risk

Treatment for ovarian cancer

Treatment for ovarian cancer aims to remove as much of the cancer as possible surgically and then provide chemotherapy to kill any potentially remaining cancer cells in the body.

What is covered under PMB level of care?

Treatable ovarian cancer is a Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB) condition under Diagnosis and Treatment Pair (DTP) code 952M - Cancer of ovary - treatable. According to the PMB regulation, treatable cancers are defined as follows:

- i. they involve only the organ of origin and have not spread to adjacent organs;
- ii. there is no evidence of distant metastatic spread;
- iii. they have not, by means of compression, infarction, or other means, brought about irreversible and irreparable damage to the organ within which they originated (for example, brain stem compression caused by a cerebral tumour) or another vital organ;
- iv. if points (i) to (iii) do not apply, there is a well-demonstrated five-year survival rate of greater than 10% for the given therapy for the condition concerned.

According to the PMB regulations, schemes must pay for the diagnosis, treatment and care costs of treatable ovarian cancer, irrespective of the medical scheme option a member belongs to. This would include consultations with doctors and other health professionals, surgery, radiology, pathology, chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

Council for Medical Schemes has published the [PMB Definition Guidelines for ovarian cancer](#). These provide detailed information on the treatment options that are PMB level of care and those that are not.

References

1. Cancer.Net. 2021. Ovarian, fallopian tube, and peritoneal cancer: Risk factors and prevention. [online] Available at: <<https://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/ovarian-fallopian-tube-and-peritoneal-cancer/risk-factors-and-prevention>> [Accessed 27 October 2021].
2. American Cancer Society. 2021. Ovarian cancer risk factors. [online] Available at: <<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/ovarian-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html>> [Accessed 27 October 2021].
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2021. What can I do to reduce my risk of ovarian cancer? | CDC. [online] Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/ovarian/basic_info/prevention.htm> [Accessed 28 October 2021].
4. National Library of Medicine. 2021. Ovarian cancer. MedlinePlus Genetics. [online] Medlineplus.gov. Available at: <<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/ovarian-cancer/>> [Accessed 25 October 2021].
5. Saint Johns Cancer, 2022. Ovarian Cancer. [image] Available at: <<https://www.saintjohnscancer.org/gynecology/conditions-we-treat/ovarian-cancer/>> [Accessed 19 January 2022].
6. Mayo Clinic. 2021. Ovarian cancer: Symptoms and causes. [online] Available at: <<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ovarian-cancer/symp->

[toms-causes/syc-20375941](https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/ovarian-cancer/symptoms-causes/syc-20375941)> [Accessed 25 October 2021].

7. Council for Medical Schemes. 2019. Final PMB definition guidelines for ovarian cancer. [online]. Available from: <https://www.medicalschemes.com/files/PMB%20Definition%20Project/FinalPMBdefinitionguidelineforovariancancer.pdf> [Accessed 29 October 2021].
8. Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance. 2021. Treating ovarian cancer. [online] Available at: <<https://mno-ovarian.org/treating-ovarian-cancer/>> [Accessed 28 October 2021].
9. Ovarian Cancer Research Alliance. 2021. Risk factors. OCRA. [online] Available at: <<https://ocrahope.org/patients/about-ovarian-cancer/risk-factors/>> [Accessed 26 October 2021].
10. World Cancer Research Fund. 2021. Ovarian cancer. [online] Available at: <<https://www.wcrf.org/dietandcancer/ovarian-cancer/>> [Accessed 18 October 2021].

The Communications Unit would like to thank the Clinical Unit for assisting with this edition of CMScript

Contact information:

information@medicalschemes.co.za
 Hotline: 0861 123 267
 Fax: 012 430 7644

The clinical information furnished in this article is intended for information purposes only and professional medical advice must be sought in all instances where you believe that you may be suffering from a medical condition. The Council for Medical Schemes is not liable for any prejudice in the event of any person choosing to act or rely solely on any information published in CMScript without having sought the necessary professional medical advice.

