

Gynecologic Cancers

Gynecologic cancers are cancers of the female reproductive system and include the uterus, cervix, ovary, vulva and vagina. Gynecologic cancers occur when cells in the female reproductive system grow and multiply uncontrollably, damaging surrounding tissue and interfering with the normal function of the reproductive system.

The most important thing any woman can do to lower her risks of a gynecologic cancer is reduce the known risk factors and follow screening guidelines for detecting the cancer at its earliest stage. When cancer is detected early, chances of it being successfully treated are greatest.

Symptoms

Symptoms of different gynecologic cancers can be similar to each other, but may vary from woman to woman. Symptoms for the most common gynecologic cancers – endometrial and ovarian – are listed below.

Endometrial

- bleeding after menopause (experienced by more than 90 percent of endometrial cancer patients)
- irregular or heavy vaginal bleeding before menopause
- change in bowel or bladder habits

Ovarian

- abdominal swelling and/or pain
- bloating and/or a feeling of fullness
- persistent, gastrointestinal complaints such as gas, nausea and indigestion
- frequency and/or urgency of urination
- change in bowel habits
- unexplained weight loss or gain
- unusual fatigue, backaches
- abnormal or postmenopausal bleeding

Many of these symptoms are not cancer, but if you notice one or more of them lasting for more than two weeks, see your doctor.



When doctors advised her to take it easy during her chemotherapy treatment for ovarian cancer, Kyndall Truett politely declined. Truett found that when she forced herself to exercise, she felt better. Years later, Truett, an ovarian cancer survivor and exercise specialist, has developed a fitness program for cancer patients called “Fit to Fight.”

Risk Factors

Many factors influence the development of gynecologic cancers. Risk factors for endometrial and ovarian cancers are listed below.

Endometrial

- **weight** Obesity is a strong risk factor for endometrial cancer.
- **inherited predisposition** Women with a family history of colorectal and/or endometrial cancer may have Lynch Syndrome, or Hereditary Non-Polyposis Colorectal Cancer Syndrome (HNPCC), which significantly increases the risk of endometrial cancer. Inherited genes associated with Lynch Syndrome account for five percent of endometrial cancer cases.
- **tamoxifen** Women who take tamoxifen are at an increased risk.
- **infertility** Women who have a history of infertility or Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) are at increased risk.
- **diabetes** Women with diabetes are at higher risk.

Ovarian

- **inherited predisposition** Women with a family history of ovarian and/or breast cancer may have a BRCA1 or BRCA2 genetic mutation, which significantly increases the risk of ovarian cancer.
- **childbirth** Never being pregnant is a risk factor.
- **infertility** Women who have a history of infertility are at increased risk.

Screening

Cancer screenings are medical tests performed when a person has no symptoms. For two of the most common gynecologic cancers, endometrial and ovarian, screening is not usually recommended. MD Anderson recommends that women at average risk be aware of symptoms and seek prompt medical care if symptoms persist.

For women with Lynch Syndrome, an annual endometrial sampling is recommended beginning at age 35.

For women with Hereditary Ovarian Cancer Syndrome, annual or semi-annual pelvic exam, CA -125 blood test and transvaginal ultrasound may be considered on the advice of their physician.

Reducing Your Risk

You can take action to reduce your risk of developing endometrial and ovarian cancers. Making the healthy changes below does not mean you will not get endometrial or ovarian cancer, but it may lower your chances.

Endometrial

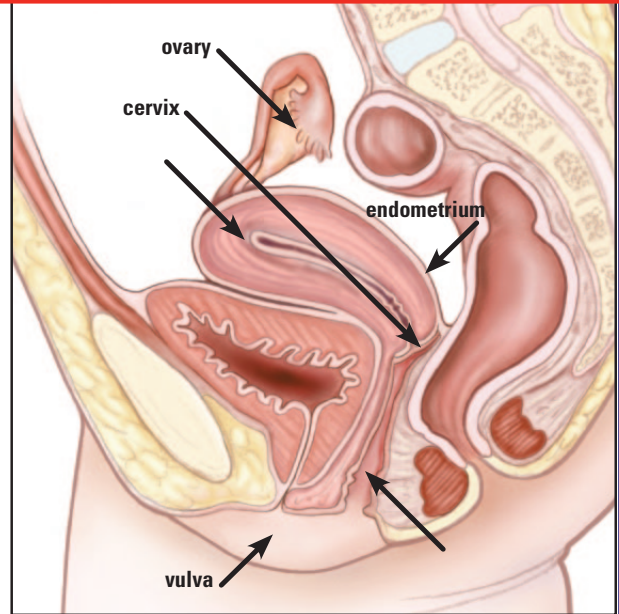
- maintain a healthy weight
- talk to a physician about ways to regulate irregular menstrual periods
- participate in prevention or early detection research studies

See a physician immediately if you experience any post-menopausal or irregular bleeding.

Ovarian

- take oral contraceptives
- become pregnant
- have a tubal ligation (surgical sterilization procedure)

Take the time to discuss your own risks with your health care provider who can best advise you on the screening exams and risk reduction strategies that are right for you. Visit www.mdanderson.org/preventionstudy to learn about research studies available to healthy women who are at risk for developing a gynecologic cancer.



Gynecologic cancers occur in the uterus, cervix, ovary, vulva and vagina. Endometrial cancers are the most common gynecologic cancers, followed by ovarian cancers. Endometrial cancers develop in the lining of the cervix and uterus respectively. Ovarian cancer can develop on the external surface of the ovary or inside the ovary itself.

MD Anderson Resources

The Cancer Prevention Center can help you understand your risk of developing cancer through risk assessment and, when appropriate, genetic testing. The center offers personalized risk-reduction strategies, including healthy lifestyle recommendations and the use of medications to reduce cancer risk. Specialists perform risk-based cancer screening exams based on age, gender and cancer risk factors.

MD Anderson provides cancer care services at five convenient locations in the greater Houston area: Bay Area, Katy, Texas Medical Center, Sugar Land and The Woodlands.

For more information about MD Anderson programs or services, or to make an appointment, contact askMDAnderson at 1-877-632-6789 and ask for Carla, or visit www.mdanderson.org/ask.

Want to learn how you can prevent cancer?

Get a personalized action plan by completing MD Anderson's Cancer Risk Check at www.mdanderson.org/riskcheck.