

Ovarian Cancer Screening

Ovarian cancer kills more women yearly in the United States than all other cancers of the female reproductive organs combined. Only lung, colon, and breast cancer have higher cancer death rates. For some cancers, such as breast and cervix, cancer screening programs are well-established. These programs can detect cancer at an early stage – before it spreads to other organs. Medical professionals in women's health are attempting to combat ovarian cancer in a similar way, detecting ovarian cancers in the early stages, before symptoms appear and advance to other areas.

The objective of ovarian cancer screening with ultrasound is to detect ovarian cancer in the early stages, before it spreads to other organs.

The most significant challenge with ovarian cancer is that by the time the cancer shows symptoms, it has already spread to other organs. Approximately 80% of ovarian cancers have already spread to other parts of the body when ovarian cancer has been diagnosed. Ovarian cancer is difficult to cure once it spreads outside the pelvis. A late diagnosis makes curing ovarian cancer highly unlikely.

Only 20% of ovarian cancers are found at an early stage. Cure is much more likely if ovarian cancer can be found at an early stage, when it is contained to the ovaries.

Annual physical exams are not likely to detect an early ovarian cancer.

There are blood tests to detect ovarian cancer. The CA 125 is the test that is most successful, yet, it only detects about half of the early ovarian cancers. The CA 125 measures a specific protein in a woman's blood. The most common form of ovarian cancer, serous type, causes high levels of this protein. However, 40-50% of ovarian cancers are other forms, and not detected by the CA 125 test. In addition, there is an increased amount of CA 125 false positive results among premenopausal women with noncancerous conditions such as ovulation, endometriosis, and pregnancy. The CA 125 is a more accurate test for postmenopausal women than premenopausal women, having much fewer false positive results.

Ultrasound images can detect ovarian abnormalities that physical exams and blood tests are not able to detect. With the development of ultrasound techniques, a transvaginal ultrasound allows your physician to evaluate your ovaries without surgery. For your ultrasound, a drape sheet will be provided and you will be asked to undress from the waist down. A transvaginal transducer is placed in the vagina to obtain images of the ovaries. The screening is usually not painful.

Medical research of ultrasound in ovarian cancer screening has increased dramatically and continues. Though ultrasound screens may have both false negative and false positive results, we believe it can be an effective method to detect early ovarian cancer.

If you are in menopause, you may schedule the ultrasound anytime. If you are still menstruating, schedule your appointment as early as possible in the menstrual cycle.

Frequently Asked Questions

What happens if the ultrasound is not normal?

The physician reviewing the ultrasound will determine the appropriate follow-up. This may simply be a complete gynecologic ultrasound performed 4 - 6 weeks later.

Will my medical insurance pay for the screening ultrasound?

It is not possible to know whether a given insurance company will pay for ovarian cancer screening ultrasound. Please contact your insurance provider to determine your coverage. We have worked to reduce the cost of ultrasound screening. If your insurer does not provide coverage for an ultrasound, you are responsible for payment.

Is ultrasound screening for ovarian cancer recommended by the American Cancer Society?

Currently, the American Cancer Society has no recommendations for any screening for ovarian cancer. As 25,000 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year, we believe that women should be offered a screening ultrasound.