**Ovarian Cancer: What Are the Risk Factors?**

The chance of surviving ovarian cancer is better if the cancer is found early, but it’s difficult to detect in its early stage. That’s why having an ovarian check every year (when you have your pap test) is so important! Be aware of factors that put you at higher risk:

- **Inherited genetic defects.** Mutant genes, originally identified in families with multiple cases of breast cancer, are responsible for 5–10% of ovarian cancers.
- **Personal history of breast or colon cancer.**
- **Family history.** One or more first-degree relatives (mother, sister, daughter) with ovarian cancer.
- **Early menarche** – starting monthly periods before age 12.
- **Late menopause** – stopping monthly periods after age 52.
- **Age.** Your risk increases as you age up until the late 70s.
- **Infertility.** The risk is highest for those with unexplained infertility.
- **Certain fertility drugs.**
- **Ovarian cysts.** After menopause, the larger the growth, the greater the risk.
- **Hormone replacement therapy.** Findings are still inconsistent, but women who used menopausal hormone therapy for 5+ years have an increased risk.
- **Obesity in early adulthood.** Women who are obese at 18 are at increased risk of developing ovarian cancer before menopause.
- **Childbearing status.** Women who have had at least one pregnancy are at lower risk. Having a first child after age 30 increases risk.
- **Oral contraceptives** may offer protection against ovarian cancer.

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**Meet Ann Cuvala**

Ann Cuvala began her nursing career twenty-five years ago. Today she is an oncology clinical nurse specialist at Advocate South Suburban Hospital in Hazel Crest.

“Ovarian cancer was once called The Silent Cancer. Now it's The Cancer That Whispers,” says Ann Cuvala. “The clues are always there: Bloating in the belly, achiness, backache. Women need to stop overlooking those clues.”

The most successfully treated cases are those which are detected early. “Don’t wait for pain and swelling,” Ann warns. “It’s easy to unbutton our pants after dinner, but having to do that night after night signals a problem. Yes, women experience more bloating as they age, but listen to those whispers,” she reminds.

**Most important of all, be tested each year.** “Ovarian cancer isn’t detected by a pap smear but during the ovarian check the doctor administers along with the pap test, so that annual exam is critical.”

Other wisdom Ann has picked up during her career in cancer treatment? “If you do have ovarian cancer, seek support – even if you are at first embarrassed or are reluctant to identify yourself with ‘those people.’ In a support group, you will be buddied up by age and by diagnosis with someone who can truly help you.

“Support groups are not just psycho-social,” Ann adds. “You’ll have cooking demos because eating well is important now. Yes, you’ll form meaningful friendships. But you’ll also learn practical things in your support group -- from tai chi to how to release tensions -- things which offer real benefits to you at this time. After all, it’s your life we’re talking about here.”

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**Prayer:** Loving God, I deeply appreciate the life you have given me and want to carefully tend this precious gift. Guide me and grant me courage to do so. Amen.

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Your Advocate

**September Is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month**

- Advocate Health Care: advocatehealth.com/gsam/cancer
- American Cancer Society: cancer.org
- Ovarian Cancer National Alliance: ovariancancer.org
- National Ovarian Cancer Coalition: ovarian.org