

Ovarian Cancer: The Whispering Disease

September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ovarian cancer is the second most common gynecologic cancer in the United States. It also causes more deaths than any other cancer of the female reproductive system. This is in large part due to its “silent” symptoms, which is why it also is known as the “whispering disease.”

“The symptoms of this cancer can be very non-specific, so it’s very important to be aware of these symptoms, which can include abdominal distention or bloating or shortness of breath or abdominal pain or pelvic pain or urinary symptoms. Sometimes even getting blood clots in the legs could be because of ovarian cancer,” explained Dr. Shamila Garg, Hematologist/Oncologist, OSF HealthCare.

Additional symptoms of ovarian cancer include having trouble eating, feeling full quickly, change in bowel movements, or change in appetite. Because many of these signs and symptoms seem minor, women are more likely to hold off on seeing a doctor until experiencing more severe symptoms or the disease has spread.

According to the American Cancer Society, more than 21,000 women in the United States will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2020. However, only about 20 percent of cases are diagnosed at an early stage.

“If you have any symptoms like abdominal distention or urinary symptoms or shortness of breath or pain, you should see your PCP and gynecologist right away, because ignoring these symptoms can lead to cancer diagnosis at a very advanced stage,” Dr. Garg says.

Furthermore, while it is typical for women over the age of 50 to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer, that is not always the case.

“Ovarian cancer can present at any age, but the most common age group is in the 60s. But if you have a high-risk family or genetic mutation, then patients can present at a much younger age,” Dr. Garg explains.

Family history and genetics also play a role in your risk factor for ovarian cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, the risk of ovarian cancer is highest in women with a family history of breast cancer as well.

Dr. Garg recommends sharing your family history with your primary care provider (PCP) or your gynecologist during your routine appointments if you are able to do so. Most importantly, do not ignore the tell-tale “silent” signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer, especially if they become persistent.

“I would advise all women to be aware of the symptoms and seek advice from your primary care and your gynecological doctor. Be aware and take all the preventative steps and the screening methods that can be used to diagnose this cancer early so that it can be treated successfully,” said Dr. Garg.

As knowledge about gynecologic cancer continues to expand, more treatment options are available now than ever before. Go to www.osfhealthcare.org/cancer to access tools and resources.