

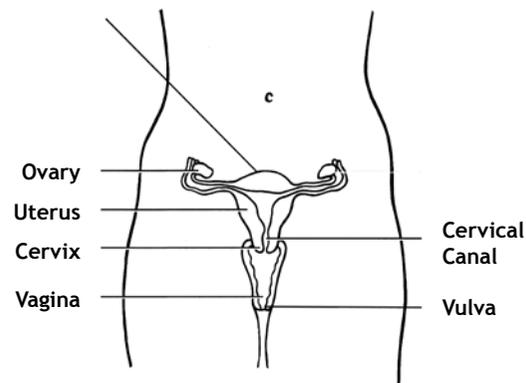
Gynaecological cancers

This leaflet has been prepared to help you understand more about the different gynaecological cancers. It gives information about the main types, abnormal signs to look for and some ways to reduce your risk.

What are gynaecological cancers?

Cancer is when damaged, abnormal cells start to reproduce uncontrollably eventually forming tumours. These cells can then spread to other parts of the body where they can then form more tumours. Gynaecological cancers are cancers of any part of the reproductive organs in women. This includes cervical, ovarian, uterine (or endometrial), vulval and vaginal cancers. (See diagram below)

Endometrium/Uterus



How Common are gynaecological cancers?

Gynaecological cancers are not common cancers but they do take the lives of around 350 New Zealand women each year. Ovarian cancer causes around 190 of these deaths. For all the gynaecological cancers, like most cancers, the risk increases with age.



What causes gynaecological cancers?

For ovarian and endometrial (lining of the uterus) cancers the causes are not well understood. However it is known that;

- women who have not had children
- women who are overweight

may have an increased risk for these cancers

A cause of some cervical, vulval and vaginal cancers is a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). This is a common sexually transmitted virus. Most women are infected with it at some point in their lives. For most women it will never cause any problems. However, for a few women it causes cell changes that can lead to cancer.

What screening tests are there for gynaecological cancers?

Smear tests (also called Pap tests) detect early cell changes that if untreated may become cervical cancer. The tests therefore help prevent cervical cancer from developing by allowing early treatment of the abnormal cells before they become cancer. This is the only screening test available and it is only for cervical cancer.

Smear tests **will not** detect any precancerous or cancerous cell changes associated with ovarian, endometrial, vulval or vaginal cancers. Unfortunately there are currently no tests available to be used as screening tests for any of these other gynaecological cancers. So noticing any abnormal symptoms, and getting medical advice promptly is very important.



What can reduce the risk?

1. Reducing exposure to the HPV virus

Having safe sex (using condoms) with all sexual partners will reduce the risk of exposure to HPV. Use of the HPV vaccine by girls before they become sexually active has been shown to protect them from HPV infection and help prevent vulval, vaginal and cervical cancers.

2. Be smokefree

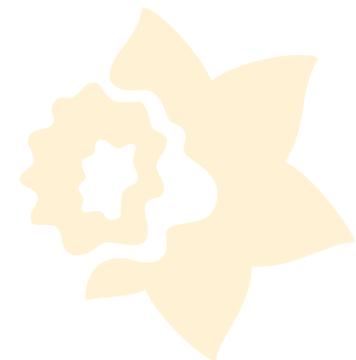
Smoking increases the risk for cervical cancer in particular. Stopping now may start to reduce your risk and will help to improve your general health. www.quitsmoking.org.nz

3. A healthy diet and regular physical activity

Being overweight can increase the risk for some gynaecological cancers.

4. Cervical smear test (Pap test)

Having a three yearly cervical smear test from the age of 20, will help prevent cervical cancer.



What should all women look for?

Any changes that are not normal for you need to be discussed with your doctor.

Changes to look out for include:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge, especially after menopause
- General abdominal pain
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Itchy skin around the opening to the vagina
- Difficulty passing urine.

Ovarian cancer is the most serious of the gynaecological cancers because it takes the lives of more women than all the other gynaecological cancers combined. Unfortunately at this time, there are no effective screening tests available to detect this cancer. We do know however, that women who experience certain symptoms are more likely to have ovarian cancer.

These include:

- Increased abdominal size/persistent bloating
- Pelvic and/or abdominal pain
- Difficulty when eating and feeling full quickly

Other symptoms such as urinary problems, changes in bowel habits, extreme fatigue or back pain may also be experienced. It is unlikely that these symptoms are ovarian cancer, *but if you have any of these for longer than three weeks you should see your doctor.*



Where can I get more information?

- For more information please contact our Cancer Information Helpline 0800 CANCER (226 237) or visit the Cancer Society's website www.cancernz.org.nz



- Or contact the Silver Ribbon Foundation. For general enquiries please call 0800 Ovarian (0800 6827426) Info@silverribbon.co.nz, www.silverribbon.co.nz



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Gynaecological Cancers Information for all Women



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