



Cervical · Ovarian · Endometrial/Uterine · Vaginal · Vulvar

# GYNECOLOGIC CANCER AWARENESS

Know the Symptoms, Reduce the Risk

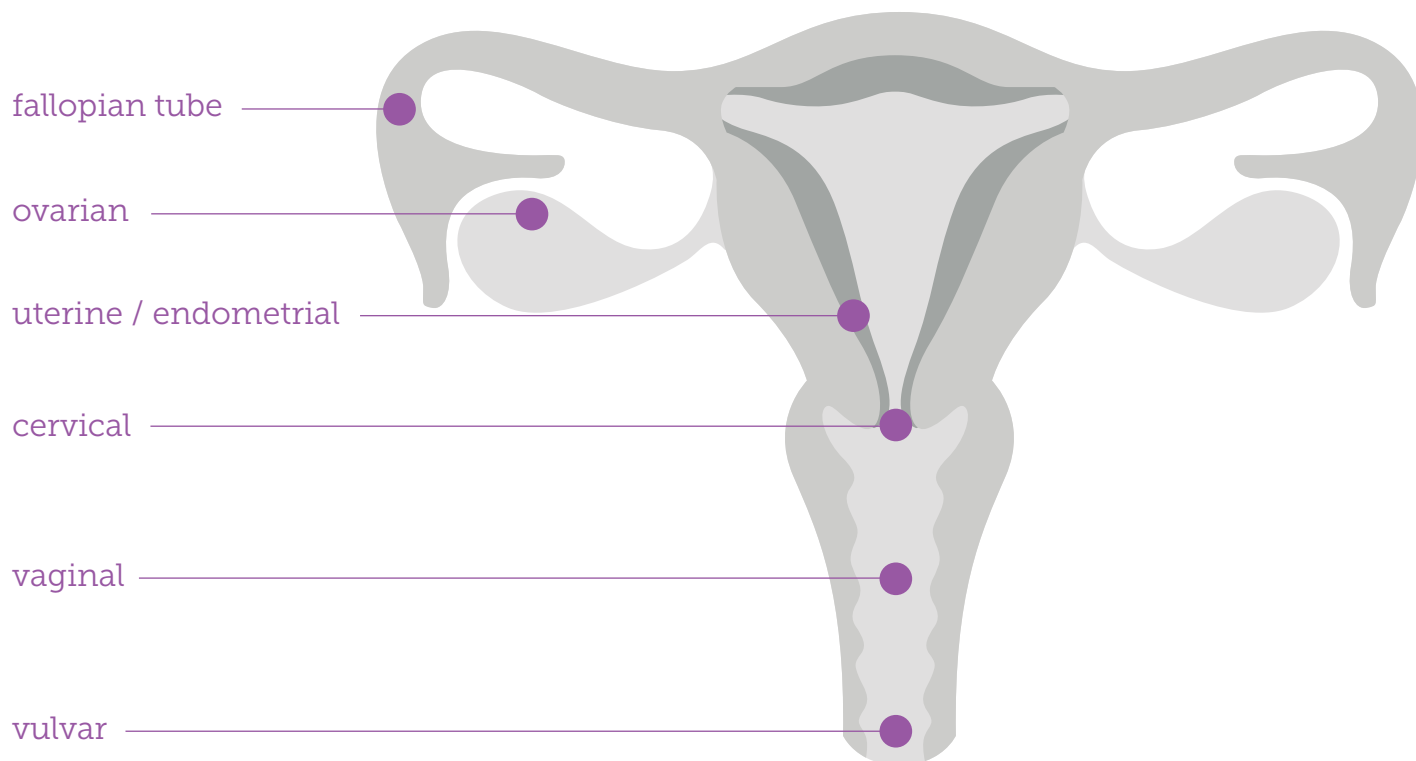
RESEARCH · AWARENESS · OUTREACH · EDUCATION



# What is Cancer?

Cancer is a word used to define a collection of diseases that share one unique characteristic—the uncontrolled growth of cells that have the potential to spread (metastasize) to other parts of the body. Gynecologic cancers grow from reproductive organ(s) including the cervix, uterus (or endometrium), ovaries, fallopian tubes, vagina and vulva.

# Gynecologic Cancers



Each year approximately 110,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with one of the five main gynecologic cancers: cervical, ovarian, endometrial (uterine), vulvar or vaginal. This brochure is designed to help you understand the symptoms and minimize your risk of serious health effects from gynecologic cancers.

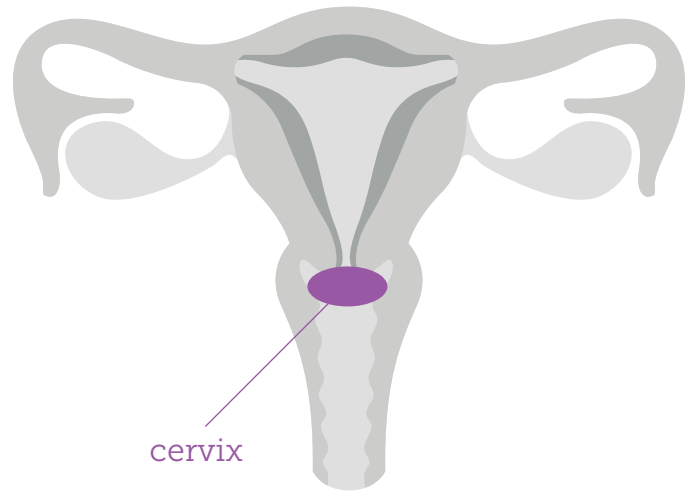
During September, Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Month, and throughout the year, the Foundation for Women's Cancer (FWC) hopes to help people understand steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of developing these cancers and to promote early detection and appropriate screening and follow up.

If you have been diagnosed with ovarian, endometrial/uterine, cervical, vulvar, or vaginal cancer, it is important to have a gynecologic oncologist—a medical doctor with specialized training in treating gynecologic cancers—as part of your medical team to help manage your care from diagnosis to completion of treatment.



# Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is a cancer that begins in the cervix, the part of the uterus or womb that opens to the vagina. It is the part of the uterus that dilates and opens fully to allow a baby to pass into the birth canal. The normal cervix has two main types of cells: squamous cells that protect the outside of the cervix, and glandular cells that are mostly inside the cervix which make the fluid and mucus commonly seen during ovulation. Cervical cancer is caused by abnormal changes in either of these cell types in the cervix and is the only gynecologic cancer that can be prevented by regular screening and appropriate vaccination.



## Know the Facts

- Almost all cervical cancer is caused by a persistent infection with high-risk type human papillomavirus, or HPV.
- The HPV vaccine is a safe and well-studied cancer prevention vaccine that can prevent cervical cancer and other HPV related cancers such as anal cancer and head/neck/throat cancer.
- HPV vaccination is recommended for all children, boys and girls, ideally at ages 11 and 12. All people are recommended to get the HPV vaccine between 9 and 26 years of age but can choose to get the HPV Vaccine up until age 45.
- Vaccination before becoming sexually active can prevent most cervical precancer (a.k.a. dysplasia) and cancer and does not increase the onset of starting sexual activity or intimacy.
- Regular Pap smears and HPV testing are important in preventing cervical cancer.

## Symptoms

- Cervical cancer usually affects women between ages 30 and 55, but younger and older women are also at risk if they have not had regular screening.
- Excessive discharge and abnormal bleeding between periods
- Bleeding after menopause

These symptoms may be caused by cancer or by other health problems. It is important for a woman to see her doctor and request a pelvic exam if she is having any of these symptoms. Most women will have no symptoms, so routine well woman exams along with regular Pap smears plus HPV tests—when recommended—is key to preventing cervical cancer. If your test results say you have cervical cancer, seek care from a gynecologic oncologist.

## Understanding Risk

- If your immune system does not function well due to certain medical conditions (HIV, history of transplant, need for immunosuppressive medications like steroids or medicine for lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, etc.) you may have a higher risk of cervical precancer or cancer.
- Smoking weakens the immune system and can make it harder for someone's immune system to clear an HPV infection. If you smoke or use tobacco, you should consider talking to your doctor about support and resources to help quit to decrease your cancer risks.
- Promote HPV vaccine for all children, teens and young adults age 9-26 years of age. Ideally, vaccines work best at younger ages before someone is sexually active.
- Get Pap tests and HPV tests when recommended.
- Keep track of your pap smear and HPV results to be sure to get timely follow up on any abnormal testing. Ask questions and be proactive about your pap smear history.
- Get an annual gynecologic check up.

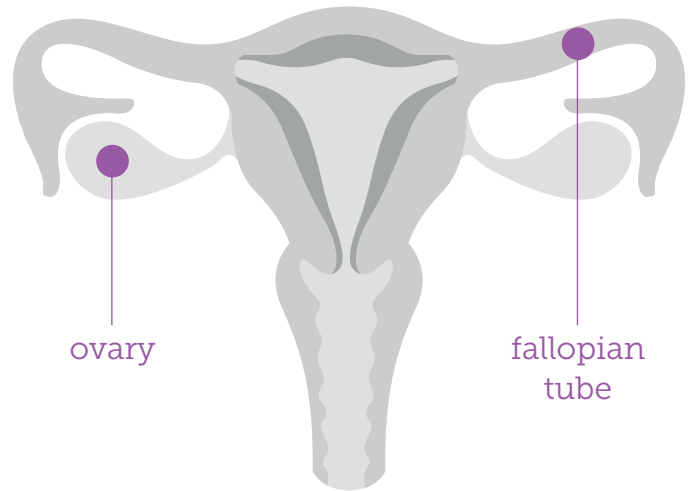


# Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer, the seventh most common cancer among women, usually starts on the surface of the ovary in cells that are called epithelial cells. About 85–90% of ovarian cancers are epithelial ovarian cancers. These cancer cells can implant themselves throughout the abdominal cavity.

Ovarian cancer, fallopian tube cancer, and primary peritoneal cancer (cancer that originates from the lining of the abdomen called the peritoneum) all have a similar type of growth and similar treatments are used. It is possible to have primary peritoneal cancer even though a woman's ovaries have been removed.

There is growing scientific evidence to support the idea that ovarian cancer may actually begin in the fallopian tubes.



## Know the Facts

- Ovarian cancer is the leading cause of death among the gynecologic cancers and the fifth leading cause of cancer death in women.
- Only 15% of all ovarian cancer cases are detected at the earliest, most curable stage.
- One in 71 women will develop ovarian cancer in her lifetime.
- Learn your individual risk of ovarian cancer.
- The Pap test only screens for cervical cancer and DOES NOT screen for ovarian cancer.
- There is currently no screening test recommended for ovarian cancer for the general population.

## Symptoms

- Bloating
- Pelvic or abdominal pain
- Difficulty eating or feeling full quickly
- Urinary symptoms — urgency or frequency
- Irregular bleeding

Women who have these symptoms almost daily for more than a few weeks should see their doctor, preferably a gynecologist or someone who can do a thorough pelvic examination

If you have symptoms of ovarian cancer that are frequent, persistent and new to you, ask your doctor to consider ovarian cancer as a possible cause. Most likely you do not have ovarian cancer, but if ovarian cancer is suspected or diagnosed, seek care from a gynecologic oncologist.





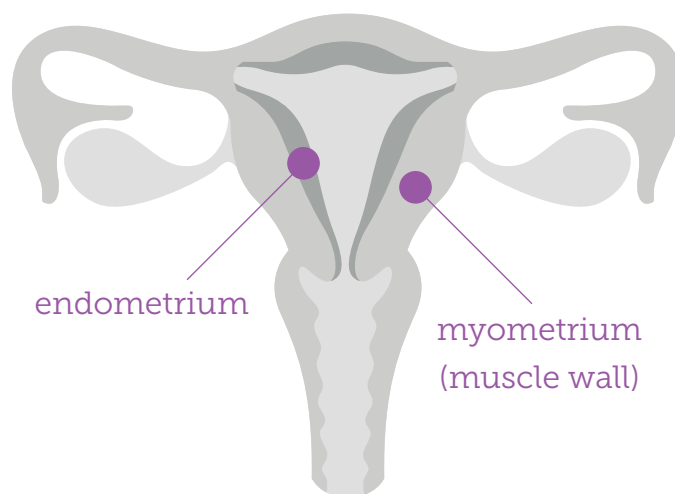
## Risk Factors

- The risk of ovarian cancer increases with age, especially around the time of menopause.
- A family history of ovarian cancer, fallopian tube cancer, primary peritoneal cancer or premenopausal breast cancer, or a personal history of premenopausal breast cancer place women at heightened risk for ovarian cancer.
- Infertility and not bearing children are risk factors; whereas, pregnancy, breast feeding and the use of birth control pills decrease risk.
- Women with surgery to remove tubes or tubal ligation also have decreased risk
- Other factors that can increase your risk of ovarian cancer include obesity, less physical activity and endometriosis.
- Women with newly diagnosed ovarian cancer should be referred for genetic testing, which not only screens for *BRCA1* and *BRCA2*, the most common gene mutations, but for a complete panel of genes less frequently associated with the risk for developing breast or ovarian cancer.
- Be proactive with your health by understanding your risk factors and listening to your body about symptoms and seeking care.

# Endometrial (Uterine) Cancer

Uterine cancer is the most common gynecologic cancer in the United States and the 4th most common cancer in women. Most uterine cancers begin in the lining of the uterus (endometrium). The endometrium is the tissue shed each month with the menstrual cycle. In the most common type of uterine cancer, called endometrial adenocarcinoma, cells in the endometrial lining grow out of control and may invade the muscular wall of the uterus and sometimes spread outside of the uterus (ovaries, lymph nodes, abdominal cavity).

Uterine sarcomas represent a type of uterine cancer in which malignant cells form in the muscle of the uterus (leiomyosarcoma) or in the network of support cells in the uterine lining (endometrial stromal sarcomas and carcinosarcomas). Accounting for up to 10% of all uterine cancers, uterine sarcomas are less common than endometrial cancer, but can have a more aggressive clinical behavior and can spread sooner to distant sites.



## Know the Facts

- The most common uterine cancer is endometrial cancer, and it is the most common gynecologic cancer diagnosed in the United States.
- Uterine cancer usually occurs around the time of menopause, but younger women also are at risk.
- There is no screening test for endometrial cancer.
- The Pap test only screens for cervical cancer and DOES NOT screen for uterine cancer.
- Uterine cancer remains a cancer with a disparity in survival when comparing Black women to other women.

## Symptoms

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding; younger women should report irregular or heavy vaginal bleeding. Absent or rare periods can also be a symptom.
- Bleeding after menopause. Even brown spotting or a single spot of blood from the vagina is abnormal after menopause and should lead to a prompt gynecologic evaluation.

If you experience these symptoms, you should have a biopsy of the endometrium to check for uterine cancer. If you have an endometrial biopsy that shows endometrial cancer, seek care from a gynecologic oncologist.



## Risk Factors

- Taking estrogen alone without progesterone
- Being overweight or obese
- Diabetes
- Hypertension
- Use of tamoxifen
- Irregular periods or having only a few periods a year
- Late menopause (after age 52)
- Never becoming pregnant
- A family history of endometrial or colon cancer (Lynch Syndrome)

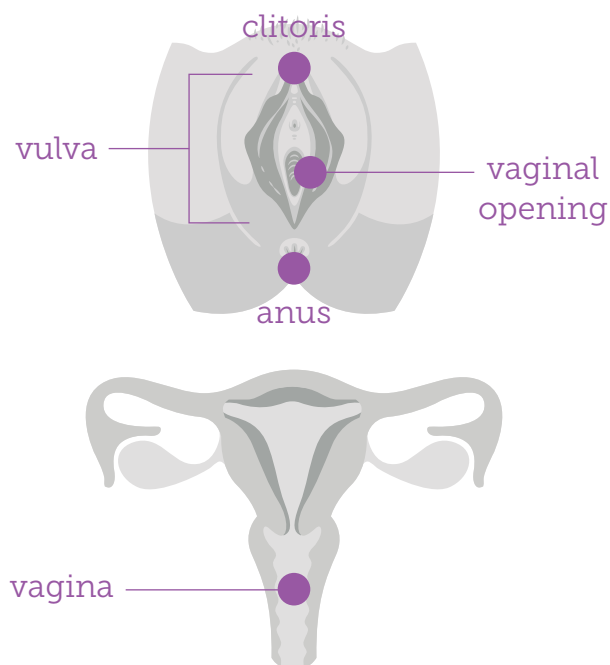
## Reducing Risk

- Increase your physical activity and exercise regularly.
- Keep your blood pressure and blood sugar under control.
- Manage your weight.
- Know your family history to understand your personal risk.



# Vaginal Cancer

Vaginal cancer originates in the vagina, the muscular tube that connects the outer part of the female genitalia (vulva) to the uterus. Most vaginal cancers occur in the lining of the vagina (squamous epithelium). It typically is diagnosed in older women.



## Know the Facts

- Vaginal cancer usually affects older women and may not cause symptoms in its earliest stage.
- Some vaginal cancers can be related to HPV infections.
- Patients with a history of cervical cancer may be at higher risk for other HPV-related cancers.

## Symptoms

- Unusual bleeding between periods or after menopause
- Bleeding after vaginal sex or intercourse
- Vaginal, pelvic, buttock or back pain
- Watery or unusual discharge that can be clear, brown, or bloody
- Lump or mass in the vagina
- Problems with urination or bowel movements

If you suspect or have been diagnosed with vaginal pre-cancer or cancer, seek care from a gynecologic oncologist.



## Risk Factors

- Infection with HPV (human papillomavirus)
- Smoking
- Age (60 years and older)
- A mother who took DES when pregnant (a hormone medicine used many years ago during pregnancy to prevent miscarriage)

## Reducing Risk

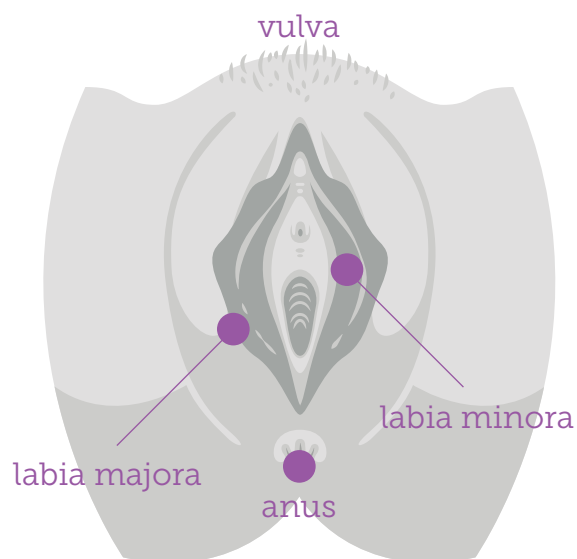
- Don't smoke or quit smoking as soon as possible. Smoking weakens the immune system and a weakened immune system can lead to persistent HPV infection.
- Get vaccinated for HPV before you become sexually active.
- Undergo a regular annual gynecologic exam including a pelvic examination.
- Get Pap test and HPV tests when recommended.

Many precancerous conditions and early vaginal cancers can be detected through routine pelvic exams and Pap tests. Because many vaginal cancers are associated with HPV types 16 and 18, vaginal cancer now can be prevented by vaccinations advocated for the prevention of cervical cancer.



## Vulvar Cancer

The vulva includes the labia majora (outer lips), the labia minora (inner lips), the clitoris and the opening of the vagina. Vulvar cancer is caused by the growth and spread of abnormal cells within the skin of the labia and the skin surrounding the vaginal opening and the skin between the vagina and the anus (the perineum). Vulvar cancer most often affects the inner edges of the labia majora or the labia minora. Vulvar cancer can occur in young women as well as older women — the difference in causes is typically based on age.



### Know the Facts

- Vulvar cancer often occurs in older women. Women in their 70's, 80's and 90's should request an exam and care for symptoms such as itching, burning or bleeding.
- Infection with HPV (human papillomavirus) is a common cause of vulvar cancer in young women. A history of vulvar warts can also cause vulvar cancer in younger women.
- Symptoms are often confused with common infections such as yeast infections. A pelvic exam with visual inspection can lead to diagnosis.
- Vulvar cancer is very uncommon but can be cured if caught early. Use a mirror to examine your vulva for any changes.

### Symptoms

- Chronic itching
- Burning
- Pain
- Abnormal bleeding or discharge
- Skin color changes (lighter or darker, red or pink)
- Bump or lump with wart-like or raw surfaces
- Open sore (ulcer)

See your doctor, preferably a gynecologist, if you experience these symptoms. Have a biopsy of any abnormal growth or lesion in the genital area. If you suspect you have or have been diagnosed with vulvar cancer, seek care from a gynecologic oncologist.

## Risk Factors

If your immune system does not function well (HIV, history of transplant, need for immunosuppressive medications like steroids or medicine for lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's disease, etc.), you may have a higher risk of vulvar cancer.







FWC provides funding for gynecologic cancer research and training, as well as educational programs and resources. The Foundation is committed to supporting research, awareness, and education.



# How you can help

Raise awareness [about gyn cancers](#).

Donate [to the Foundation for Women's Cancer](#) online.

Host [your own fundraising event](#) or partner with the Foundation.

Give [a matching gift](#) through your employer to the Foundation.

Give [gifts of stock or securities](#) to the Foundation.

Designate [a planned gift](#) to the Foundation.

The Foundation for Women's Cancer offers many resources for patients, advocates and the general public, including Survivor Courses around the U.S., webinars and an online education series.

To make a gift or for additional information, please email the Foundation at [info@foundationforwomenscancer.org](mailto:info@foundationforwomenscancer.org) or call 312.578.1439.

## Donate & learn more

[foundationforwomenscancer.org](http://foundationforwomenscancer.org)



The Foundation for Women's Cancer (FWC) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing research, education and awareness about gynecologic cancer risk, prevention, early detection and optimal treatment.

[foundationforwomenscancer.org](http://foundationforwomenscancer.org)

[info@foundationforwomenscancer.org](mailto:info@foundationforwomenscancer.org)

phone 312.578.1439

fax 312.235.4059

Foundation for Women's Cancer

230 W. Monroe, Suite 710

Chicago, IL 60606-4703

 /foundationforwomenscancer

 @GYNCancer

 @foundationforwomenscancer



Society of Gynecologic Oncology

The FWC is the official foundation of the Society of Gynecologic Oncology.

Printing of this brochure made possible by generous educational sponsorship from Eisai, GSK, Merck and Seagen/Genmab. Sponsorship excludes editorial input.

Content developed by the Foundation for Women's Cancer (FWC).

© 2021 Foundation for Women's Cancer. All rights reserved.