

HEAR us out: Ovarian cancer is the 5th leading cause of cancer deaths among women in the US!



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Women's health starts with research and ends with education – education as in awareness to become our own best health care advocate. So to those who ask why women's health research... did you know that there is currently no screening test that can detect ovarian cancer at its early stage?

Some statistics might help highlight the importance of women's health research as it pertains to ovarian cancer: ⁽¹⁾

- About 21,290 women will receive a new diagnosis of ovarian cancer in 2015.
- About 14,180 women will die from ovarian cancer in 2015.
- Ovarian cancer ranks fifth in cancer deaths among women, accounting for more deaths than any other cancer of the female reproductive system.

- A woman's risk of getting ovarian cancer during her lifetime is about 1 in 75.
- This cancer mainly develops in older women. About half of the women who are diagnosed with ovarian cancer are 63 years or older. It is more common in Caucasian women than African-American women.
- Even though ovarian cancer has a low incidence, it is typically diagnosed at an advanced stage and the overall five-year survival rate is poor at best: only 45% of women diagnosed will survive.

But what about the awareness side of the equation?

The Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego was founded by Peg Ford, ovarian cancer survivor, and Kathy Hagan, who lost her mother to ovarian cancer. It currently brings awareness to the community through three trademarked programs:

- **HEAR™ (Hope, Experiences, Awareness & Risk Factors): If I Only Knew Then, What I Know Now** is a community outreach program focused on presenting the experiences of ovarian cancer survivors in hopes that their knowledge can influence women in the community to be aware of the risk, symptoms and treatment available to women diagnosed with ovarian cancer.
- **STS (Survivors Teaching Students):** Ovarian Cancer National Alliance's nationwide education program looks to bridge survivors' experiences with future healthcare professionals by offering an insight as to the path these survivors followed. From 2008, to date, the Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego has given numerous presentations to almost 5,000 third year medical students and residents at UCSD, Bastyr and MidWestern University; nursing students (11 schools of nursing) and practicing medical physicians and healthcare providers throughout San Diego. In addition OCA of SD has collaborated with a gynecologic oncologist in his presentations to several Scripps and Sharp physicians and healthcare providers.
- The expansion of their **Speaker's Bureau** is targeted at practicing physicians with the goal of reminding them of the signs, symptoms and risk factors for the early detection of ovarian cancer.

"Increased awareness as a result of the Ovarian Cancer Coalition of San Diego's efforts should bring changes in the medical community", comments Dr. Carole Banka. "The survival rate when detected early is above 90%. Research on ways to detect this devastating disease at its early stages is crucial and support for young researchers in the area of ovarian cancer is greatly needed".

“We need to make a difference by affecting change in how ovarian cancer is considered by physicians. It should be a top priority rather than the last thing they think about”, comments Ford. An ovarian cancer survivor herself, she is passionate about creating awareness of this terrible disease. “I was fortunate to be referred into the care of a brilliant gynecologic oncologist at Stage I (unheard of in most cases) and my mission is to get this diagnosis and outcome for all women!”

So what can we do when suspecting ovarian cancer?

Education is key. The symptoms of ovarian cancer are: bloating, pelvic or abdominal pain, trouble eating or feeling full quickly and urinary symptoms such as urgency (always feeling like you have to go) or frequency (having to go often). Other issues that might accompany these symptoms include fatigue, an upset stomach, back pain, pain during sex, constipation, menstrual changes and abdominal swelling with weight loss. The tricky thing is that the discomfort caused by these nonspecific symptoms are often mistaken for more common benign conditions such as constipation or irritable bowels. The key issue then becomes having these symptoms REPEATEDLY in a month.

There is no screening test for the early detection of ovarian cancer. The CA-125 testing that everyone relates to diagnosing ovarian cancer only confirms there is a high probability of such cancer being present and is used to monitor ovarian cancer survivors after they are diagnosed and have received initial treatment.

Understanding the Risk Factors: (2)

- A small percentage of ovarian cancers are caused by inherited gene mutations – BRCA1 and BRCA2. Women with these mutations also have a significantly increased risk of breast cancer.
- Estrogen hormone therapy, especially with long-term use and in large doses.
- Age when menstruation started and ended. If you began menstruating before age 12 or underwent menopause after age 52, or both, your risk of ovarian cancer may be higher.
- Never being pregnant.
- Fertility treatment.
- Smoking.
- Use of an intrauterine device.
- Polycystic ovary syndrome.

Talk to your doctor about your symptoms. Although an early screening test for ovarian cancer is not yet developed, you can ask your gynecologist to conduct a pelvic and rectal exam.

Imaging tests such as an ultrasound or a CT scan can also be of assistance should there be anything abnormal in your pelvic exam.

Seek support from an organization like the Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego. They have a list of resources that you can definitely take advantage of while dealing with ovarian cancer.

“Until there is a screening test for the early detection of ovarian cancer, we have to rely on the awareness of all medical doctors and healthcare providers. We must also inspire women to be aware of their bodies and be their own advocates to get care in a timely fashion”, comments Ford.

It seems Soroptimist International keeps making an impact on women in our community! The Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego was able to structure the HEAR program thanks to a 2015 Best for Women Grant from Soroptimist International of Coronado. And we all know Soroptimist International of La Jolla established the Doris A. Howell Foundation for Women’s Health Research.

There are many wonderful organizations nationwide with one goal in common: present the latest research in women’s health, offer the tools to make an informed decision on our own health, and most importantly, provide the much needed support to women going through ovarian cancer today and in the future.

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About the Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego:

The Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego is committed to eradicating ovarian cancer by working towards advancing cancer research and education of the medical community for early diagnosis, improving the quality of care for patients, and addressing legislative issues that affect evidence-based ovarian cancer care and research.

About the Doris A. Howell Foundation:

The Doris A. Howell Foundation for Women’s Health Research is committed to keeping the women we love healthy, advancing women’s health through research and educating women to be catalysts for improving family health in the community.

The organization does so by funding scholarships to students researching issues affecting women’s health; providing a forum for medical experts, scientists, doctors, and researchers to convey timely information on topics relevant to women’s health and the health of their families through its Lecture and Evening Series, and by funding research initiatives that improve the health of under-served women and increase awareness and advocacy in the community.

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Sources:

The Ovarian Cancer Alliance of San Diego: <http://www.ocaofsd.org/index.html>