

Ovarian Cancer: There IS Hope!

We say Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, but I'd bet his wife gave him the idea. Did you know he also perfected the curling iron? Women have influenced forward progress since the beginning of time, and today's women are no different. They are busy juggling careers and families. They multi-task, take care of others, and look for ways to make the world around them an even better place to live. However, women stay so busy that they also tend to ignore their bodies, which can sometimes affect their health.

Of the six types of reproductive cancers, ovarian cancer remains the most mysterious and difficult to detect. It is neither common nor rare, but it is the most deadly of the gynecologic cancers. Only 10% of cases are hereditary; therefore, any woman is at risk of this disease. Despite these grim statistics, there IS hope for ovarian cancer.

Be aware

When detected early, ovarian cancer has a 95% cure rate. However, most cases are not actually diagnosed until late stages. This is mainly because the symptoms are so easy to miss and because there is no screening test. Therefore, awareness of the symptoms is key to early detection. Even when a big project is due, the kids are sick or there are more errands to run, stop to learn the symptoms of ovarian cancer.

Listen to your body

Contrary to popular belief, 90% women do report symptoms. Symptoms are often confused with other conditions because they may be unrelated to the gynecologic tract, or they may be similar to menstrual or menopausal symptoms. Therefore, paying attention to your body and talking to your doctor is essential. Don't let symptoms sneak up on you. Every so often add it to your "to do list" to ask yourself the following questions:

Do I have any one of the symptoms listed?

Is the symptom unusual for my own body?

Has the symptom persisted over a length of time, at least 3 weeks?

Has the symptom affected my everyday life 20-30 times in the past month?

Symptoms include abdominal bloating or pressure, frequent urination or incontinence, unexplained weight loss or gain, shortness of breath, unusual and overwhelming fatigue, and gastrointestinal disturbances.

Know your options

Ovarian cancer is initially treated by removing as much of the cancer as possible. Research indicates that this surgery should be performed by a gynecologic oncologist to ensure the best outcome for the patient. After surgery, the gynecologic oncologist will determine a chemotherapy treatment plan, if needed. Even here in Huntsville, new chemotherapy drugs that reduce toxicity and improve efficacy are projected to undergo tests in patients who are eligible.

Look to the future

Because ovarian cancer has such a good prognosis when detected early, a screening test could significantly improve mortality statistics. Screening tests are currently in trials. The

future looks bright for treatment plans as well: new chemotherapy drugs are being studied even here in Huntsville for newly diagnosed ovarian cancer patients who qualify. Individual women are doing their fair share of looking ahead, too: Johanna's Law has been proposed in the US House of Representatives to educate women nationwide about gynecologic cancers.

Find support

Perhaps the most hopeful option for those affected by ovarian cancer is Lilies of the Valley, the ovarian cancer support and awareness group in the Tennessee Valley. This active, optimistic group informs women about how to find support if they have the disease, what to look for if they don't, and how everyone can support Johanna's Law in the US House of Representatives.

HOPE!

Hope does exist for ovarian cancer. If treated early by a gynecologic oncologist, this disease has a very high cure rate. A screening test will likely be available in the future. New drugs are being tested continually to ensure better outcomes. Lilies of the Valley and Johanna's Law will increase awareness both at home and nationwide.

In the everyday busyness of life, today's women need to slow down – just for a minute – and take a moment for themselves. For just a minute, the kids, the work, the errands, the housework can wait, especially if it means it could save your life. Learn the symptoms of ovarian cancer, listen to your body, and share the information with another woman you love.