

Sources:

American Cancer Society:
www.cancer.org

National Cancer Institute NIH Publications No. 98-1562,
94-1561, 95-2047

Helpful Resources:

- National Line of Breast Cancer Organizations (212) 719-0154
- National Cancer Institute (800) 422-6237

Muslim Women's League

Cancers of the Female Reproductive Tract



What is cancer?

Cancer is the name given to a group of diseases in which the body's cells divide to form masses of tissue called tumors. A cancer is named after the region of the body in which the cells begin dividing (i.e. the breast). This brochure discusses forms of cancer common to women as well as ways in which they can be detected and prevented.



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Endometrial/Uterine Cancer

Endometrial cancer or uterine cancer is the most common cancer of the female reproductive tract. The risk factors for this disease are high dietary fat intake, obesity, polycystic ovarian syndrome, nulliparity (never having conceived children), delayed menopause, or having a family history of breast or ovarian cancer.

Uterine cancer usually occurs after menopause or around the time of menopause, and it most commonly causes abnormal bleeding. Possible symptoms may also include unusual vaginal discharge, difficulty or pain during urination or sexual intercourse, and pain in the pelvic area. This disease may be detected during a pelvic exam in which the doctor feels the internal organs for any abnormalities. A pap smear is also taken in which a sample of cells from the cervix are tested. A biopsy, or a removal of tissue from the uterine lining, is done to diagnose uterine cancer.

Treatment

The doctor and patient formulate a treatment plan that best suits each individual. Treatment may involve a hysterectomy, where the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries are removed. Radiation therapy, hormone therapy, and chemotherapy may also be used.

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is the third most common malignancy for women over the age of 50, but it can also affect younger women. Precancerous cells in the cervix do not cause any pain and can only be detected by having a pelvic exam and pap test. Symptoms will not appear until the cells become cancerous and begin spreading to other tissues. At this time, abnormal bleeding may occur between menstrual periods and after sexual intercourse. Menstrual bleeding may become heavier and last longer. Increased vaginal discharge is another symptom of this cancer.

Irresponsible behavioral decisions play a large role in increasing the chance for developing cervical cancer. Some of its risk factors include having intercourse at an early age, multiple sexual partners, and cigarette smoking. Sexually transmitted diseases such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HPV (human papilloma virus) also play a possible role in the development of cervical cancer. Although HPV infection causes no noticeable symptoms, it is linked to over 90% of cancers and pre-cancers of the cervix.

Prevention

The best way to prevent this type of cancer is to avoid the above risk factors and to schedule pap exams every year. Fifty percent of women with cervical cancer have not had regular pap tests for about ten years, which results in detecting the disease at a very late stage.

Treatment

Most often, treatment includes surgery and radiation therapy. Sometimes chemotherapy is used as well.

Cancers Common to Women

Breast Cancer

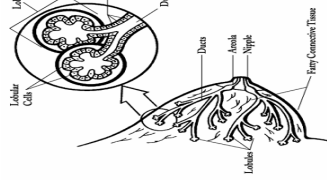
It is estimated that one out of eight women will get breast cancer during her lifetime. For this reason, women must be informed about the disease and its signs. The earlier it is detected, the better the chance one has of surviving cancer and receiving successful treatment.

Tumors in the Breast

When cells in the body divide to form a tumor, the tumor can be described as either benign or malignant. In a benign tumor, the cells are not cancerous and do not spread to other areas. If the tumor is malignant, then its cells are cancerous and may spread throughout the body, also known as metastasis.

Breast cancer can arise in the milk ducts of the breast (the small channels through which breast milk travels). This form of cancer, called **ductal cancer** is the most common type of breast cancer in women ages 40-49. On the other hand, a small percentage of breast cancers arise in the lobules. **Lobular carcinoma**, as it is called, usually occurs in premenopausal women.

When ductal or lobular cancer spreads to other parts of the body, it is called invasive. Otherwise, it is termed in situ or non-invasive cancer.



What Causes This Disease?

Although there are no known causes for breast cancer, there are many factors that may increase a woman's chance of getting the disease. These include:

- ▶ Being female
- ▶ Being over age 60
- ▶ Family history of the disease
- ▶ Previously having breast cancer
- ▶ High-fat, low-fiber diet
- ▶ Alcohol use
- ▶ Nulliparity (never having been pregnant) or having one's first child after age 30
- ▶ Having begun menstruating before age twelve or having stopped menstruating after age 54

Prevention

If you noticed any risk factors listed above that you may have, try to reduce them as much as possible. For things that are beyond your control, you can still reduce your risk for the disease by having regular check-ups and getting specialized testing such as genetic testing. Recently, the FDA approved the use of Tamoxifen for women at high risk of developing breast cancer. This medication can slow or stop the growth of cancer cells. However, since it may incur side effects, it is essential for women at risk to undergo risk assessment to determine if they are candidates for prevention therapy with Tamoxifen.

Detecting the Disease

Women are instructed to examine their breasts at home every month. They should also get examined by a doctor annually (See the MWL brochure on General Health). Be aware of signs that may indicate cancer such as:

- ▶ Lump(s) in either breast
- ▶ Breast pain or enlargement
- ▶ Thickening of the skin and small dimples resembling an orange peel
- ▶ Discharge of fluid other than milk through the nipple

Although having these symptoms does not necessarily mean you have cancer, it is best to take precautions just to be safe.

Treatment

When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, a treatment plan is discussed between her and her doctor. Depending on the type of cancer, the size of the tumor, and the spread of the disease, various treatment options are considered. A mastectomy takes place in which a small portion or sometimes the entire breast is removed. Other forms of treatment are radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, and reconstructive surgery, where breast implants are inserted.

Ovarian Cancer

Ovarian cancer is a common malignancy in women over the age of 50, and it afflicts approximately one in seventy women. The following factors put women at risk of developing this disease:

- ▶ High fat diet
- ▶ Infertility or never having conceived children
- ▶ Having the first child after age 30
- ▶ Delayed menopause
- ▶ History of other forms of cancer

Because the symptoms of ovarian cancer are vague, the disease is hard to detect and has usually spread by the time it is found. The symptoms include indigestion, bloating, discomfort in the lower abdomen, loss of appetite, a feeling of fullness after eating, unexplained weight loss, gas pains, nausea, and backache. A large tumor may also put pressure on the bladder or bowel, causing diarrhea or constipation.

Prevention

There are no definitive methods for early detection of ovarian cancer, but yearly pelvic exams and pap smears can provide clues for early detection. For women who have a strong family history of cancer or for those suspecting ovarian cancer, other tests may be performed by the doctor. Studies have shown that the use of birth control pills can reduce the risk of ovarian cancer.

Treatment

Surgery is performed to remove the ovaries and possibly the uterus and fallopian tubes. A patient may also undergo radiation or chemotherapy depending on the stage of the cancer.