

## *Early Warning Signs of Gynecological Cancer*

A bipartisan bill was introduced by Senator Arlen Specter that would help educate physicians to better identify gynecological cancers in their patients. The introduction to the bill indicates it is needed for two reasons:

1. Women are generally unaware of the risk factors and early symptoms of gynecological cancers
2. Physicians are typically “not prepared to adequately consider the presence of gynecological cancers when patients first show symptoms.”

The symptoms of gynecological cancers are often confused with common gastrointestinal illnesses, menopause, or perimenopause. The five-year survival rates for the most common forms of these cancers are 90% when diagnosed early, but drop to 50% or less later. Early detection is critical.

For this reason, anything that seems even slightly unusual should be brought to your physician's attention. And be prepared to suggest gynecological cancer as the cause since your physician may not even consider the possibility unless it is suggested.

Some of the most common symptoms of gynecologic cancers include:

- Enlarged abdomen
- Persistent indigestion
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- Abnormal vaginal discharge
- Pelvic and abdomen pain
- Lower back pain
- A change in bowel or bladder habits
- Unusual weight loss or weight gain.

### **SOME SPECIFIC CANCERS AND THEIR SYMPTOMS**

**Premalignant Vulvar Cancer.** The common symptoms are itching and burning and these symptoms can be present for years. It is usually misdiagnosed as a yeast infection and a multitude of anti-fungal agents will have been prescribed, none of which will have been effective. It is easy to see on examination and will appear as a raised red, white or pigmented patch. A simple biopsy will confirm the diagnosis.

**Cancer of the Vagina.** If a cancer involves the cervix, it is considered to be cervical



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cancer, so vaginal cancer is technically rare. The premalignant phase has no symptoms, but can be detected by routine pap tests. Bleeding after intercourse is common in both vaginal and cervical cancers. Symptoms of vaginal cancer may also include abnormal bleeding and foul discharge. Women who have had a hysterectomy for non-cancer problems should still have a Pap test every several years.

**Cervical Cancer.** Pap tests are effective screening for premalignant abnormalities and almost all cervical cancers are diagnosed in this way. The symptoms of an advancing cancer are the same as for vaginal cancer.

**Uterine Cancer.** Age is the most important risk factor for uterine cancer and there are no recommended screening procedures for premalignancy. Pap tests are unable to detect uterine cancer. The only test for uterine cancer is the D&C or possibly hysteroscopy. The symptom of uterine cancer is abnormal bleeding and any bleeding in postmenopausal women should be considered to be uterine cancer until proven otherwise.

**Ovarian Cancer.** This refers to are more than 20 types of cancers that occur in the ovaries. According to Dr. William Rich, Clinical Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of California, San Francisco, “There have been many attempts to screen for ovarian cancers. None have been shown to be worthwhile.”

There are no early symptoms of ovarian cancers, although sometimes a cystic mass can be discovered during a routine gynecological examination. A common symptom of an advancing cancer is the build up of fluids in the abdomen. Or sometimes a cyst might break and cause bleeding.

Other ovarian cancer symptoms can include shortness of breath or an extended period of intestinal problems. Tests like barium enemas are not effective in diagnosing intestinal involvement in ovarian cancer because the problem is on the outside of the intestines. The ovaries are also a site to which intestinal and breast cancers can spread.

***Women need to be aware of the early symptoms of gynecological cancer and voice their concerns. When it comes to these forms of cancer, never assume that your physician has already thought about the possibilities.***

[SOURCES: [gyncancer.com](http://gyncancer.com) and [aurorahealthcare.org](http://aurorahealthcare.org)]

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