

## Birth Control Pills and Prevention of Ovarian Cancer

The ovary is a small organ in the pelvis that makes female hormones and releases eggs which, when fertilized with sperm, can develop into a baby. A woman has two ovaries, one on either side of the uterus or womb (see figure).

Cancer can occur in the ovary, as sometimes happens with other organs. About 23,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year. It is the sixth most common cancer in women and causes more deaths than any other reproductive organ cancer. More than 14,000 die from the disease annually.

The most common type of ovarian cancer develops in the outside lining of the ovary. The cancer cells can grow and spread to other parts of the body. Ovarian cancer should not be confused with ovarian *cysts*, which are fluid-filled sacs, like a blister, that form on the surface of an ovary. Ovarian cysts are not cancer and usually go away without treatment.

The chances for survival are greater if ovarian cancer is found early. For example, 95% of women diagnosed and treated with early disease will live 5 or more years.

Unfortunately, only one-quarter of ovarian cancer cases are discovered at this stage. Although women with ovarian cancer sometimes have symptoms, such as upset stomach or a feeling of pressure or pain in the pelvis, more often they have no noticeable signs. By the time symptoms are noticeable, the cancer usually has spread inside the abdomen.

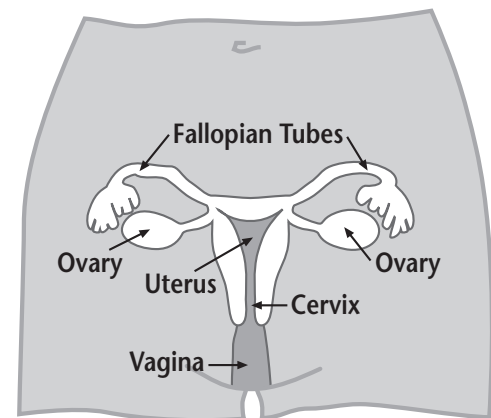
### **Risk Factors**

The exact causes of ovarian cancer are not known. However, studies have shown that certain factors increase the chance of developing this disease.

- **Family history.** Some women are at higher risk of developing ovarian cancer because at least one close relative (mother, sister, or daughter) has had the disease. A woman with a family history of ovarian cancer has a 5% lifetime risk of getting it. This compares with a 1.8% lifetime risk of ovarian cancer in a woman with no affected relatives.
- **Age.** The chance of developing ovarian cancer increases as a woman gets older. Most ovarian cancers occur in women over the age of 50 years, with the highest risk in women over age 60 years.
- **Childbearing.** Women who have never had children are more likely to develop ovarian cancer than women who have had children. In fact, the more children a woman has had, the less likely she is to develop ovarian cancer.

---

### *A Woman's Reproductive System*



*A woman's ovaries are located in the pelvis, on either side of her uterus.*

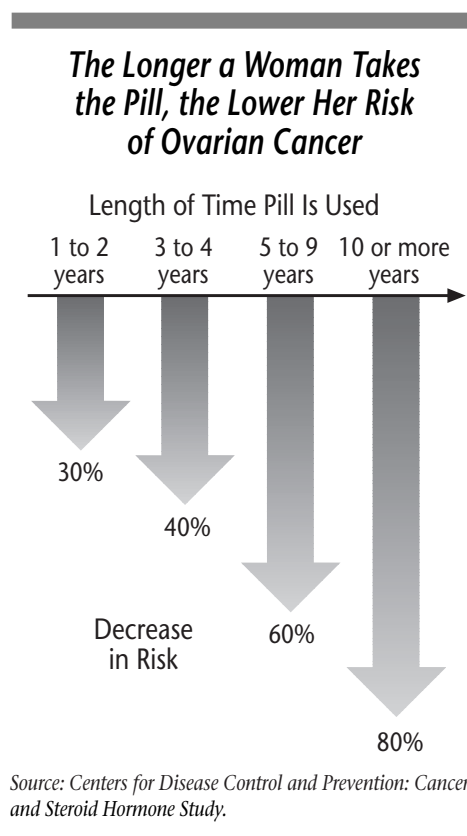
## ***Birth Control Pills***

Many studies have found that women who use or have used birth control pills (oral contraceptives) are about half as likely to get ovarian cancer compared with those who have never used the pill. Researchers aren't sure how oral contraceptives protect against ovarian cancer, but this benefit is well documented.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Cancer and Steroid Hormone (CASH) Study, along with other research conducted over the past 20 years, shows that the longer a woman uses birth control pills, the lower her chance of getting ovarian cancer (see figure). Importantly, this benefit continues long after she stops taking the pill.

The CASH Study found that the reduced risk of ovarian cancer is seen in women who have used oral contraceptives for as little as 3 to 6 months and continues for 15 years after stopping. Other studies show the protection lasts for at least 20 to 30 years.

Recent research also has confirmed that today's low-dose oral contraceptives give just as much protection as older, high-dose pills. Even high-risk women (those with a higher genetic likelihood of getting ovarian cancer) can lower their risk by using birth control pills. Speak with your clinician about your individual risk and the benefits of oral contraceptives.



### ***For More Information***

To learn more about ovarian cancer and oral contraceptives, speak with your clinician or contact the following organizations:

#### **American Cancer Society (ACS)**

1-800-ACS-2345 (1-800-227-2345)

<http://www.cancer.org>

ACS publication:

- "Ovarian Cancer - Overview"

[http://www3.cancer.org/cancerinfo/load\\_cont.asp](http://www3.cancer.org/cancerinfo/load_cont.asp)

#### **National Cancer Institute (NCI)**

Cancer Information Service

1-800-4CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers):

1-800-332-8615

<http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov>

NCI publications:

- "What You Need to Know about Ovarian Cancer" (publication 00-1561)  
[http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov/wyntk\\_pubs/ovarian.htm](http://cancernet.nci.nih.gov/wyntk_pubs/ovarian.htm)
- "Oral Contraceptives and Cancer Risk" (fact sheet 3.13)  
[http://cis.nci.nih.gov/fact/3\\_13.htm](http://cis.nci.nih.gov/fact/3_13.htm)