

Certain symptoms may be early signs of ovarian cancer

Ovarian cancer has long been called a “silent killer,” because symptoms are thought to develop only after the disease has reached an advanced stage and is largely incurable. But health experts have now identified a set of physical complaints that often occur in women who have ovarian cancer and may be early warning signs. These symptoms are very common, and most women with them do not have ovarian cancer. But for the women who do, the hope is that greater awareness will lead to earlier diagnosis and treatment.

In June, the Gynecologic Cancer Foundation, the Society of Gynecologic Oncologists, and the American Cancer Society issued a consensus statement highlighting four symptoms that are more likely to occur in women with ovarian cancer than in women in the general population. These symptoms are bloating or increased abdominal size; pelvic or abdominal pain; difficulty eating or feeling full quickly; and urinary frequency or urgency.

The statement recommends that any woman who experiences one or more of these complaints almost daily for more than a few weeks should see a clinician (preferably a gynecologist) for a thorough pelvic exam. Pelvic exams that raise suspicions are usually followed up with a non-invasive test called transvaginal ultrasound and possibly a blood test for a marker called CA-125, which is sometimes elevated in women with ovarian cancer. (By itself, CA-125

testing is not a good screening tool.) The only way to diagnose ovarian cancer is during surgery, which is best performed by a gynecologic oncologist or other surgeon skilled in ovarian cancer.

Research has shown that many women who have ovarian cancer complained about symptoms well before they were diagnosed, but their concerns were either ignored or attributed to something else. Certainly the symptoms highlighted in the consensus statement—bloating, abdominal pain, fullness, and frequent or urgent urination—accompany many other health problems, such as menstrual difficulties, irritable bowel syndrome, and bladder infections. But if such symptoms are new, persist for several weeks, and get worse with time, they may be a sign of ovarian cancer, according to Dr. Barbara Goff, whose research at the University of Washington in Seattle was instrumental in the development of the consensus statement.

It's estimated that more than 22,000 women in the United States will be diagnosed this year with ovarian cancer, and over 15,000 will die of the disease. Unlike cancers of the lung, colon, and breast, there is no good screening test for ovarian cancer. Although it's unclear whether recognizing these warning signs will lead to better outcomes, cancer experts and advocacy groups suggest that greater awareness of them may be the best hope for earlier diagnosis and improved survival. ♥

Selected resources

National Ovarian Cancer Coalition
888-682-7426 (toll free)
www.ovarian.org

Ovarian Cancer National Alliance
202-331-1332
www.ovariancancer.org

Women's Cancer Network
312-578-1439
www.wcn.org

Retinol helps reverse normal skin aging

Throughout life, our skin helps shield us from the sun's ultraviolet rays, often at the price of premature aging (called photoaging), with its attendant lines, wrinkles, and brown spots. Many procedures and skin products are designed to address these effects, including retinoids—topical vitamin A–based drugs. Now research has found that retinol, one of the retinoid compounds, can also help counter the signs of skin aging that's unrelated to the sun, including fine wrinkles, roughness, and skin looseness. The findings, published in the May 2007 *Archives of Dermatology*, suggest that in addition to improving the appearance of older skin, retinol may also increase its durability and capacity to heal. The implications of these findings are particularly important given the rapidly rising number of older Americans.

Researchers at the University of Michigan Medical School tested retinol in a six-month randomized controlled trial involving 36 men and women, ages 80 to 96. For



Upper inner arm skin
before treatment.



Upper inner arm skin
24 weeks after treatment.

24 weeks, three times a week, study personnel applied a lotion containing 0.4% retinol (a minimal dose) to the inner portion of each participant's left or right upper arm (lotion without retinol was used on the other arm). After two, four, eight, 16, and 24 weeks, dermatologists who didn't know which arms had been treated with retinol compared the two arms for roughness, fine wrinkles, and overall severity of aging.

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