What is cancer?

Our body consists of cells. Normal cells grow, multiply and die in an orderly manner and are replaced by new cells. Cancer cells do not die but continue to multiply in a disorderly manner. Over time they can form a mass which may be malignant (cancerous).

What is ovarian cancer?

Ovarian cancer develops when this process occurs in the cells of one or both of your two ovaries.

What are the ovaries?

The ovaries are a pair of almond-sized organs that are a part of the female reproductive system. They are located on either side of the uterus (womb). The ovaries produce and release eggs and are your body’s main source of the female hormones estrogen and progesterone.

What increases my risk?

A RISK FACTOR increases the likelihood that you will develop a disease. Having a risk factor does not mean that you will develop a disease. Different cancers have different risk factors. Risk factors for ovarian cancer include:

Age – Ovarian cancer usually occurs in women after they have experienced menopause. The
majority of women are aged 63 or older at the time of diagnosis.

*Estrogen Exposure* – Estrogen is an essential female hormone. The more estrogen your body is exposed to over your lifetime the greater your risk for ovarian cancer.

Women who can answer YES to any of the statements below may be at increased risk:

- I started having my monthly period before the age of 12.
- I went through menopause after the age of 55.
- I had my first child after the age of 30.
- I have never been pregnant.
- I have used hormone replacement therapy for more than five years.

*Family History* – Increases your risk especially if your mother or sister was diagnosed with the disease. Additionally if there is a family history of breast, colon endometrial or prostate cancer your risk may be increased.

Most cases of ovarian cancer are not caused by inherited genes. However individuals who have inherited the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene from their parents may be at increased risk for ovarian cancer.

*Personal Medical History* – If you have previously been diagnosed with cancer of the ovary or with breast or colon cancer your risk will be increased.

*Infertility* – Women who have taken fertility drugs are at increased risk.

*Endometriosis* – A disease in which endometrial cells spread to other parts of the body. Women who have been diagnosed with this condition are at increased risk for ovarian cancer.

*Obesity* – Being overweight or obese increases your risk.
Smoking and Alcohol

What decreases my risk?

Any factor that lowers your risk of developing a disease is known as a PROTECTIVE FACTOR. These factors do not guarantee that a disease will not develop. Different cancers have different protective factors. Protective factors for ovarian cancer prevention include:

Pregnancy - A woman who has had children has a lower risk of developing ovarian cancer than a woman who has had no children. The risk gets lower with each pregnancy.

Breastfeeding - Women who breastfeed their children have a lower risk of developing ovarian cancer than women who do not breastfeed; the longer you breastfeed your child, the lower your risk.

Oral Contraceptives - or the “pill” as it is known will decrease your risk for developing ovarian cancer especially if used for a number of years.

Gynecologic Surgery - Women who have had tubal ligation surgery or a hysterectomy for medical reasons may be at decreased risk for ovarian cancer.

Diet - There is evidence to suggest that women who eat a low-fat diet, high in fruits and vegetables may have a lower risk of developing ovarian cancer.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Early ovarian cancer often has no signs or symptoms. However you may experience:

- Pain in your pelvis, lower stomach or side
- A full, bloated, swollen feeling in your stomach
- Difficulty eating or feeling full very quickly
- Needing to pass urine more frequently and/or feelings of urgency
- Frequent heartburn, upset stomach or indigestion
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Change in bowel habits e.g. constipation
Screening tests are done on persons who have no signs or symptoms of a disease.

There is no reliable, routine screening recommended for ovarian cancer. However your doctor may recommend that you have one of the following tests:

* **Pelvic Exam** – in which a medical practitioner inserts a gloved hand into your vagina and places the other hand on your abdomen. S/he is able to feel for any abnormalities in the size or shape of your uterus and ovaries.

* **Transvaginal Ultrasound** – in which an ultrasound probe is placed in your vagina to create an image of your ovaries.

* **CA-125 Blood Test** – A blood test which is elevated may indicate the presence of ovarian cancer. This test can be elevated for reasons other than ovarian cancer and you can also have normal levels and still have ovarian cancer. For this reason this test is NOT recommended as a screening test for ovarian cancer.