Understanding the Difference Between Ovarian Cancer and Cervical Cancer

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Cervical Cancer vs. Ovarian Cancer – What Is the Difference?

If you've recently been diagnosed with a gynecologic cancer, the differences in the types can be a bit confusing. Two of the more common types, ovarian cancer and cervical cancer, are discussed below.

What Is Ovarian Cancer?

When cancer is found in the female reproductive glands, a diagnosis of ovarian cancer can be given. Initially, ovarian cancer can be difficult to diagnose because there are also a variety of non-malignant tumors that may be found in the ovaries.

Non-Malignant Ovarian Tumors

Benign epithelial ovarian tumors are just that — benign tumors. Although any type of tumor may be scary, a benign tumor typically does not spread or lead to any serious illness.

There are a variety of types of benign ovarian tumors, such as serous cystadenomas, mucinous cystadenomas, and Brenner tumors.

Tumors of low malignant potential (LMP) are also called borderline epithelial ovarian cancer. These tumors do not appear to be cancerous when studied under a microscope. However, they do have the potential to spread to surrounding tissues, although this does happen slowly.

Ovarian cysts are fluid-filled sacs attached to the ovary. They are generally benign, but a small percentage may be cancerous.

Malignant Ovarian Tumors

Malignant epithelial ovarian tumors account for 85 to 90 percent of all ovarian cancer and can be sub-classified as serous, mucinous, endometrioid, clear cell, and undifferentiated.

The tumors are further classified as grade one, two, or three, which is based on prognosis — grade one has the best prognosis.

Ovarian germ cell tumors are often benign, but may be malignant. This type of ovarian malignancy accounts for two percent of all ovarian cancers.

They have a very positive prognosis. Ovarian germ cell tumors are sub-classified as teratomas, dysgerminomas, endodermal sinus tumors, and choriocarcinomas.

Ovarian stromal tumors account for only one percent of ovarian cancers. They also have a positive prognosis. They are sub-classified as granulosa-theca, and Sertoli-leydig cell tumors.

Symptoms of Ovarian Cancer

Despite the many types of ovarian cancer, the symptoms are similar. Symptoms of ovarian cancer include bloating, abdominal/pelvic pain, feeling full quickly, urinary problems, and some types of ovarian tumors may cause menstrual problems.

What Causes Ovarian Cancer?

There is currently no known cause for ovarian cancer, but genetics may play a part: women who have the gene mutations BRCA1 and BRCA2 have a much higher chance of developing ovarian cancer than women who do not have these gene mutations.

What Is Cervical Cancer?

When cancer is found in the cervix, a diagnosis of cervical cancer is given. Cervical cancer is typically found in the “transformation zone” of the cervix; this is where ectocervix (the portion of the cervix that extending from the vagina) and the endocervix (the cervical canal) meet.

Types of Cervical Cancer

Squamous cell cervical cancer accounts for 80 to 90 percent of all cervical cancers. This type of cervical cancer presents with squamous cells under a microscope.

Adenocarcinoma accounts for 10 to 20 percent of cervical cancer cases. This particular type of cervical cancer forms from the mucus in the endocervix. Although this type of cervical cancer is less common than squamous cell cancer, its incidence is increasing.

Symptoms of Cervical Cancer

Although both cervical and ovarian cancers are cancers of the uterus, their symptoms vary greatly.

Cervical cancer symptoms include abnormal vaginal bleeding, which may include bleeding between periods and bleeding after menopause, abnormal pelvic pain, heavy discharge, increased urinary frequency and painful urination.

What Causes Cervical Cancer?

As with all types of cancer, sometimes there is no known cause. However, cervical cancer is heavily associated with human papillomavirus (HPV).

It is estimated that 99 percent of all cervical cancers are caused by HPV. It is also estimated that by the age of 50, 80 percent of women will have been infected with some type of HPV, as there are over 100 strains of the virus.

There are two types of HPV that are known to be high-risk and cause more cases of cervical cancer than other types: HPV-16 and HPV-18.