UNDERSTANDING OVARIAN CANCER

What is Ovary and what is its function?
The Ovary is a female reproductive organ which produces eggs and female hormones – estrogen and progesterone. Every female has two ovaries, one on the right side and another on the left side of the uterus (womb). Each ovary is about the size of an almond.

What is Ovarian Cancer?
Ovarian Cancer occurs when the cells lining the ovary begin to multiply and grow in an uncontrolled manner leading to the formation of a tumour.

How common is Ovarian Cancer?
Ovarian Cancer is the third most common Cancer among Indian women after Breast and Cervical Cancer. Studies show that the incidence of Ovarian Cancer has increased in India in the last 20 years. As per Globocan 2018, the incidence of Ovarian Cancer in India is 6.2%. Every year, 36,170 new cases are diagnosed, and 24,015 women die of this disease.

Which age group is most commonly affected by this Cancer?
The most common age group for epithelial Ovarian Cancer is between 55 to 64 years with a median age of 63 years.

What are the risk factors for the development of Ovarian Cancer?
Certain factors which increase the risk of Ovarian Cancer include:

- Advancing age
- Woman who has never given birth to a child
- Woman who has never breastfed
- Early age at onset of menses and late age at menopause
- Estrogen alone hormone replacement therapy
- Long-standing endometriosis
- Obesity (increased body weight)
- Family history of Ovarian Cancer and / or Breast Cancer (inherited mutations of BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes)
- Family and / or personal history of uterine or colon cancer (mutations in genes involved in DNA mismatch repair pathway)
- Talc use on the perineum

But women who do not have any of the above mentioned risk factors can still develop Ovarian Cancer.
What are the protective factors against Ovarian Cancer?

Women aged 21 to 29 years, should have a Pap test every 3 years. From the age of 30, the preferred way to screen is to get tested every 5 years with a Pap test combined with an HPV test, or every 3 years with a Pap test, till the age of 65.

There is no known reliable way to prevent Ovarian Cancer. But there are certain factors which can help decrease the risk of Ovarian Cancer. These include:

- Oral contraceptive pill use
- Multiparity (having given birth to two or more children)
- Breastfeeding
- Removal of fallopian tubes / tubal ligation
- Removal of both tubes and ovaries in women who have tested positive for BRCA mutation

What are the symptoms of Ovarian Cancer?

Early stage Ovarian Cancer hardly produces any symptoms and is therefore difficult to detect. However, the common symptoms of Ovarian Cancer include:

- Vague discomfort or pain in the abdomen (belly)
- Dyspepsia or indigestion that does not go away
- Abdominal bloating
- Changes in bladder or bowel function (increased frequency of urination / constipation / sense of incomplete evacuation)
- Early satiety (feeling full quickly after having a small quantity of meal)

Can Ovarian Cancer be diagnosed in early stage?

Ovarian Cancer is often known as a ‘silent killer’ since it is usually asymptomatic until it has spread to other organs. In fact, 75% of cases of Ovarian Cancer are diagnosed in advanced stages. Mild digestive disturbances may have been present for some time before the diagnosis. Such complaints are usually not recognized as anything more than a “middle age indigestion”. A high index of suspicion for Ovarian Cancer is warranted in women between the ages of 40-69 yrs who have persistent unexplained gastrointestinal symptoms.

Do certain tests exist for screening of Ovarian Cancer?

There is no proven effective method of screening for Ovarian Cancer. Routine annual pelvic examination, serum Ca 125 levels and transvaginal ultrasound have not been found to detect Ovarian Cancer at early stages.

How can Ovarian Cancer be diagnosed?

Finding cancer early, before it has spread to other organs, provides the best chance for cure and long term control. Physical examination, tumour markers and radiological imaging (ultrasound / CT / MRI) help in the diagnosis of Ovarian Cancer. No biopsy should be taken from an ovarian mass in the case of early stage Ovarian Cancer which is deemed operable, as it can cause spillage into the abdomen thus increasing the stage of the disease.

How is Ovarian Cancer treated?

The treatment of Ovarian Cancer generally consists of a combination of surgery and chemotherapy. All patients with suspected Ovarian Cancer should be referred to a Gynaecologic Oncologist for proper evaluation and formation of a treatment protocol. Women with ovarian masses should be operated upon in a centre where there is availability of frozen section analysis with the plan to perform comprehensive surgical staging if frozen evaluation suggests malignancy. Surgery in advanced cases of Ovarian Cancer may entail extensive procedures, including bowel resections, removal of the inner lining of the abdomen (peritoneum) and other procedures deemed necessary to remove the tumour completely. Most cases of Ovarian Cancer (except very early stage and low grade Cancers) require chemotherapy post operatively. In some cases of advanced Ovarian Cancer where the disease is widespread, it is sometimes feasible to first give a few cycles of Chemotherapy to downsize the disease followed by surgery to debulk the tumour and then complete the remaining cycles of Chemotherapy.