

## What every person needs to know about ovarian cancer

By Alicia Tone, PhD; runner, scientist, advocate  
Scientific Advisor, Ovarian Cancer Canada

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### *The hard facts*

Despite being considered a 'rare' disease, ovarian cancer is the fifth most common cause of cancer-related death in Canadian women. Approximately 3,000 Canadians will be diagnosed in 2023; more than half will die within 5 years of diagnosis. While many individuals with ovarian cancer are living longer and better with advances in treatment and supportive care, 75% of patients continue to be diagnosed at a late stage (stage III or IV) and long-term survival rates have not changed in 50 years.

So why is ovarian cancer so hard to detect at an earlier, potentially curable, stage? To understand this, it is important to appreciate that ovarian cancer is not one disease; rather, the term "ovarian cancer" refers to a group of diseases that originate at or near the ovaries. Each type of ovarian cancer is associated with a distinct tissue and/or cell of origin, risk factors, precursor lesions, molecular alterations, response to treatment and prognosis. This complexity has resulted in a lack of reliable diagnostic tests or screening methods that can detect the different types of ovarian cancer at an early enough stage to impact mortality. While most individuals with ovarian cancer report experiencing symptoms prior to their diagnosis, these symptoms are usually non-specific and are often mistaken for more common benign conditions. Furthermore, the most common and lethal type of ovarian cancer, called high-grade serous carcinoma, typically starts in the fallopian tubes and can spread when the primary tumour is still very small and before symptoms appear.

**Did you know?** There is no reliable screening test for ovarian cancer. The pap test does NOT detect ovarian cancer.

Symptoms that could indicate possible ovarian cancer are listed below. Importantly, even if you are experiencing all these symptoms, it does not mean you have ovarian cancer. However, it is important to talk to your doctor if a symptom is new to you and persists for 3 weeks or more, to rule it out.

- ✓ Persistent bloating
- ✓ Difficulty eating
- ✓ Abdominal or pelvic discomfort/pain
- ✓ Changes in urinary or bowel habits
- ✓ Menstrual irregularities
- ✓ Bleeding after menopause
- ✓ Unexplained weight gain/loss
- ✓ Extreme/persistent fatigue
- ✓ Pain with intercourse

**Five Canadian women die from ovarian cancer every day.** The impact of ovarian cancer on women diagnosed, and those who love them, can not be understated.



*"With my type of ovarian cancer, I've known early on that I would never go into remission... the time in between my recurrences, I was told, will continue getting shorter - and they have continued to get shorter, I'm on my fifth one now...In regards to when my body surrenders to ovarian cancer...it's a fact, I know that it is going to happen - likely sooner than later... It's hard because I personally can't picture a world where I'm not with my son so it's not something that I am ready to fully deal with or come to terms with, but it's for sure something that I have thought about, as a single mom living and navigating this disease." - Starla, 36 -*

*"It's not fair, but it was our beautiful life. I wish she (Cecile) was still with me but, she is, and she has changed me, and she is here with me every day and watching me and making sure I keep going and keep trying to live the life that we were hoping for... I'm just trying to keep living with her in my heart and in my mind and hope that this disease takes less and less people as time goes forward. She deserved to live longer and more, as many people do." - Lindsay, 39 -*



### *How do you know if you are at risk for ovarian cancer?*

If you were born with ovaries you are at (some) risk for ovarian cancer. In the absence of other risk factors, the lifetime chance of developing ovarian cancer is around 1 in 70. The following factors can greatly increase your lifetime risk for ovarian cancer:

- ✓ Inheritance of a change in a specific hereditary cancer gene (e.g., BRCA1, BRCA2);
- ✓ A family history of ovarian or other cancers - such as breast, endometrial (uterine), colorectal, pancreatic, or prostate - on either side of the family;
- ✓ Belonging to a specific ethnic community (e.g., Ashkenazi Jewish or French-Canadian) associated with a higher prevalence of mutations in specific hereditary cancer genes;
- ✓ A personal diagnosis of breast cancer;
- ✓ A personal diagnosis of endometriosis.

If you are worried that you may have - or be at high risk for - ovarian cancer, you can use this [printable worksheet](#) developed by Ovarian Cancer Canada to facilitate a conversation with your family doctor about your concerns. Depending on your specific situation (i.e., whether you are experiencing symptoms or are simply interested in understanding your risk for ovarian cancer), your doctor may send a referral for appropriate follow-up tests or secondary care (to determine the possibility that you

have ovarian cancer), or genetic counselling (to determine whether you should consider genetic testing of hereditary cancer genes).

### *It's time for change*

So why should you care about ovarian cancer, when only 1 in 70 women are diagnosed? First, when you start looking around you realize it is not as 'rare' as you think: most people know someone who has been directly or indirectly affected by ovarian cancer. Second, it is the most fatal women's cancer. Too many women are dying from this disease, robbing them of a future and leaving an unfillable void in the lives of those who love them. Third, this disease has been under-funded and under-studied for decades, leading to a lack of real progress unlike in breast, prostate, or other cancers.



*"Ovarian cancer may seem like just another niche issue that only affects a handful of Canadians. But if you look a little closer, you will see that ovarian cancer is much more than a disease. It is a symbol of women's health inequities. Ovarian cancer is a representation of all the ways that women and their health concerns have been dismissed, overlooked, and underfunded. By changing the landscape of ovarian cancer, we are changing the landscape of women's health."* - Alison Ross, PhD -



*"Current treatments are just buying time. From the moment of diagnosis, I understood how important it was to speak up, speak out and advocate wherever I could. Women's lives depend on it...There's so much work to be done to advance treatments and research in ovarian cancer, and patients need a voice. Scientists, researchers, and patients all need to work together to advocate, push the boundaries of science, and find a cure."* - Shannon, 45

## *How you can help: Running for Her, Running with Her*

On September 30, 2023, I will be running 31km alongside other supporters (both with and without ovaries!) to honour the 3000+ women who are diagnosed with ovarian cancer in Canada every year. 100% of funds raised through the Run for Her go directly to Ovarian Cancer Canada, to fund life-saving research, support, and advocacy. Last year, we were able to raise an incredible \$12,000 for this important cause. Information on how to register, donate or support this event - in addition to links to educational materials - can be found [here](#).



To learn more about the important work being done across the country to improve outcomes and hear directly from a woman living with ovarian cancer, you can [register](#) for a free in-person educational session hosted by the South Georgian Bay Community Health Centre at the Collingwood Library on September 29, 2023 @5-6pm.



*If you or someone you know is diagnosed with ovarian cancer and looking for more information, visit [ovariancanada.org](http://ovariancanada.org).*

### *Disclaimers*

- 1) *While I am an employee of Ovarian Cancer Canada, this article is outside of my work, and I am not speaking on behalf of Ovarian Cancer Canada. Views are my own.*
- 2) *None of the information presented is meant to serve as medical advice. If you are concerned that you may have, or may be at risk for, ovarian cancer please speak to your doctor or visit [ovariancanada.org](http://ovariancanada.org) for more information.*
- 3) *The quotes and photos published from the women affected by this disease, and Ovarian Cancer Canada staff are collected for the sole purpose of this article. They are determined to bring attention to this cause and want you to know what it means to them.*
- 4) *While I use the term "women" throughout this article, not all people born with ovaries - and therefore at risk for ovarian cancer - are women.*

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