

September is National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month

The month of September is designated as National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month. The Bergen County Department of Health Services, in conjunction with the Bergen-Hudson Chronic Disease Coalition, would like to caution that all women are at risk for ovarian cancer and that due to a lack of noticeable early symptoms, this cancer is often called a “silent killer.” Unfortunately, ovarian cancer symptoms are non-specific and there is no effective screening test for the disease. However, there are tests used to diagnose ovarian cancer and women should see their gynecologist to discuss their risk of this cancer. If diagnosed and treated early, when the cancer is confined to the ovary, the five-year survival rate is nearly 93 %.

Ovarian cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancerous) cells are found in the tissues of the ovary. An ovary is one of two small reproductive organs—about the size of an almond or slightly larger located on each side of the uterus that produce female hormones and eggs. Ovarian cancer is the leading cause of death from all gynecologic cancers and the fifth leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women in the United States. In the United States, 1 out of 40-60 females have a lifetime chance of developing ovarian cancer. The American Cancer Society estimates that about 22,000 American women will be diagnosed this year and 13,850 will die of the disease.

A woman can inherit an increased risk for ovarian cancer from either her mother’s or father’s side of her family, particularly if a first-degree relative (grandmother, mother, sister, or daughter) has, or has had cancer of the breast, colon, uterus, or rectum. Furthermore, women with a strong family history of ovarian cancer are more likely to develop the disease at an early age (younger than 50). Studies show that inheriting a defect in the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene can also increase a woman’s risk of developing ovarian cancer by about 15 to 40 percent. Women of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jewish descent have a potentially greater risk for ovarian cancer since they have a higher risk of carrying BRCA mutations.

While the presence of one or more risk factors may increase a woman’s chance of getting ovarian cancer, it does not necessarily mean that she will develop the disease. Risk factors include: genetic predisposition, personal or family history of breast, ovarian, colon, or rectum cancer, increasing age (the disease affects all ages, but most women are 55+ when diagnosed), never been pregnant, long-term use of hormone replacement therapy and obesity.

Symptoms of ovarian cancer may include: swelling of the stomach, sudden weight gain, or bloating, persistent pelvic or abdominal pain or pressure, trouble eating or feeling full quickly, feeling the need to urinate urgently or often, upset stomach or heartburn, feeling very tired all the time, back pain, pain during sex, constipation, and unusual vaginal bleeding.

These symptoms are common for some women, and may not indicate ovarian cancer. If, however, these symptoms are new and persist daily for more than two or three weeks, a woman should ask her physician about ovarian cancer. A Pap test DOES NOT detect ovarian cancer.

For more information about ovarian cancer and/or National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, contact the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition (NOCC), at 1-888-OVARIAN (1-888-682-7426) or visit www.ovarian.org. For information on the Bergen-Hudson Chronic Disease Coalition, call 201-634-2707 or aferrara@co.bergen.nj.us.

The Bergen-Hudson Chronic Disease Coalition is made possible through a grant from the New Jersey Department of Health & Senior Services’ Office of Cancer Control and Prevention. The mission of the coalition is to implement evidence-based strategies of the New Jersey Comprehensive Cancer Control Plan. For more information on Comprehensive Cancer Control in New Jersey, please visit: www.njcancer.gov.