

Awareness key to fighting ovarian cancer

OVARIAN cancer ranks as the fourth most common cancer among Malaysian women. Globally, it is the eighth most common cancer affecting women. Startlingly, around 70% of cases are diagnosed only in the advanced stages, when the disease has already spread and treatment becomes more complex. In Malaysia, the five-year survival rate stands at just 43%, a stark reminder of the importance of early detection.

Knowledge and awareness are powerful tools in changing these statistics, especially for mothers who can pass on this life-saving information to their daughters.

Silent killer that hides in plain sight
Ovarian cancer is often referred to as a "silent killer" because there are usually no symptoms in the early stages. Many women feel well and continue with their daily routines, not realising something serious is developing. By the time symptoms appear, the cancer is usually already in an advanced stage.

This is partly due to the ovaries being internal abdominal organs, which are not easily accessible, and therefore cannot be seen or felt during routine examinations. Symptoms, when they do emerge, are often vague and easily mistaken for digestive or menstrual issues, such as persistent bloating, abdominal discomfort, noticeable abdominal enlargement, loss of appetite and even breathing difficulties in severe cases.

These symptoms are so non-specific that patients often consult general practitioners, general

► Mothers who recognise symptoms can protect themselves, daughters

physicians, general surgeons or gastroenterologists before they are referred to a gynaecologist. This delays diagnosis, often with serious consequences.

From shock to strength

For Lee Yoke Woon, a 59-year-old mother, the first sign of trouble felt no different from a urinary tract infection. She had abdominal pain, nothing alarming. But in June 2020, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. It was shocking, especially since Lee has always been the "healthy" type.

Her diagnosis shook her family, especially her daughter. But it also brought them closer and led to positive lifestyle changes. Lee credits her family, friends and church members for helping her through the difficult journey. For Lee, surviving ovarian cancer gave her more than just a second chance - it gave her a mission to protect her daughter through knowledge and conversation. For her, these conversations are no longer optional. They are life-saving.

This shared responsibility, from mother to daughter, is what can help break the silence around ovarian cancer. A single conversation could be life-saving.

Understanding risk

While anyone can develop ovarian cancer, certain factors increase the

risk. Age, subfertility or having no children, a family history of ovarian or breast cancer, and specific gene mutations such as BRCA1 and BRCA2 (genes linked to a higher risk of breast and ovarian cancer) all contribute. Other less significant risks include early menstruation, late menopause and conditions such as endometriosis.

About 25% of certain common types of ovarian cancer have a hereditary basis, making it vital for women with a family history to consider genetic testing. However, genetic screening must be approached carefully. There are also non-medical implications such as insurance coverage to consider.

Younger women today, especially Gen Z, are increasingly choosing the "double income, no kids" lifestyle. While that is a personal choice, it is important to know that having children can offer significant protection against ovarian and uterine cancers. This makes conversations about reproductive health even more important between mothers and daughters.

Screening not enough

Currently, there is no reliable universal screening method for ovarian cancer. Tools such as transvaginal ultrasound and the serum CA-125 tumour marker (a blood test that measures a protein sometimes elevated in ovarian



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cancer) are helpful but not foolproof. These tests can lead to false positives, resulting in "unnecessary" surgeries.

This makes awareness all the more important. We must teach women to listen to their bodies and act early, even if symptoms seem trivial. A mother who understands these signs can protect herself and educate her daughter. That is a legacy more powerful than anything material.

Innovation, compassionate care

Treatment for ovarian cancer often involves surgery and chemotherapy. While surgery remains the mainstay of treatment, minimally invasive surgery (MIS) has gained attention in recent years. MIS has hardly any role in the surgical treatment of ovarian cancer, even in early cases.

However, for younger women

diagnosed in early stages, there is room for fertility-preserving approaches. We have to consider fertility-sparing surgery, or cryopreservation (freezing) of eggs or ovarian tissue before treatment. Unfortunately, facilities for cryopreservation are still limited in Malaysia.

A multidisciplinary approach remains crucial. Ovarian cancer is complex and requires input from oncologists, palliative physicians, radiologists, fertility specialists and supportive staff such as oncology nurses and physiotherapists. This team effort ensures the best outcomes and quality of life for patients.

This article is contributed by Subang Jaya Medical Centre consultant gynaecologist Dr Tan Teck Sin.