

## What should all women look for?

Any changes that are not normal for you and that persist for two weeks or more need to be discussed with your doctor.

*Changes to look out for include:*

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge, especially after menopause
- General abdominal pain
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Itchy skin around the opening to the vagina
- Difficulty passing urine.

Ovarian cancer is the most serious of the gynaecological cancers because it takes the lives of more women than all the other gynaecological cancers combined. Unfortunately at this time, there are no effective screening tests available to detect this cancer. We do know however, that women who experience certain symptoms are more likely to have ovarian cancer.

*These include:*

- Increased abdominal size/persistent bloating
- Pelvic and/or abdominal pain
- Difficulty eating and feeling full quickly

Other symptoms such as urinary problems, changes in bowel habits, extreme fatigue or back pain may also be experienced. It is unlikely that these symptoms are ovarian cancer, however if you have any of these symptoms for longer than two weeks you should see your doctor.

## Where can I get more information?

For more information please contact the Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER (226 237)** or visit the Cancer Society's website **www.cancernz.org.nz**

For more information please also contact the New Zealand Gynaecological Cancer Foundation For general enquiries please call **0800 Ovarian (0800 682 7426)**, e-mail us at **info@nzgcf.org.nz**, or visit our website at **www.nzgcf.org.nz**

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ANY CANCER, ANY QUESTION  
**0800 CANCER (226 237)**  
Cancer Information Helpline  
**www.cancernz.org.nz**



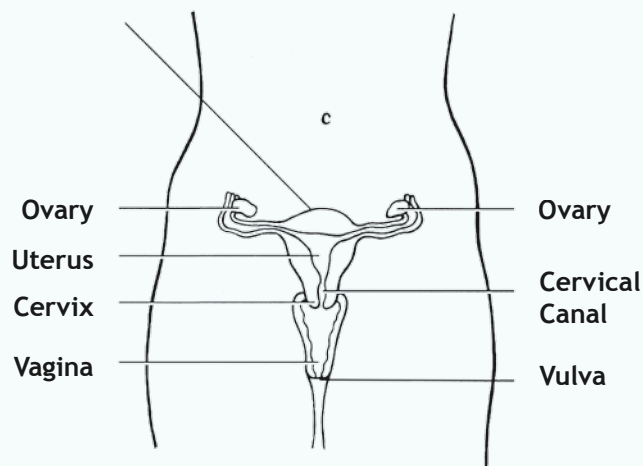
# Gynaecological Cancers

This leaflet has been prepared to help you understand more about gynaecological cancer. It provides some general information about the main types of gynaecological cancer, abnormal signs and symptoms to lookout for and some ways to reduce your risk of developing these cancers.

## What are gynaecological cancers?

Cancer occurs when damaged or abnormal cells start to reproduce uncontrollably, eventually forming tumours. These cells can then spread to other parts of the body where they may form further tumours. Gynaecological cancers are cancers that start in any part of a woman's reproductive organs. The five main gynaecological cancers are cervical, ovarian, endometrial (sometimes referred to as uterine), vulval, and vaginal cancers. (See diagram below)

### Endometrium/Uterus



## How common are gynaecological cancers?

Whilst gynaecological cancers are not common cancers, they do take the lives of more than 350 New Zealand women each year. Ovarian cancer causes around 190 of these deaths. As with most cancers, the risk of developing gynaecological cancer increases with age.

## What causes gynaecological cancer?

The causes of gynaecological cancer are not yet fully understood, particularly in relation to ovarian and endometrial cancers. However, what is known is that women who have not had children and/or who are overweight may have an increased risk of developing these cancers.

Some cervical, vulval and vaginal cancers are caused by a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). This is a common sexually transmitted virus and most women are infected with it at some point in their lives. For most women, HPV will not cause any serious health problems, however, for a few women it causes cell changes that if left untreated can lead to cancer.

## What screening tests are there for gynaecological cancers?

Smear tests (also called Pap tests) detect early cell changes that if left untreated may become cervical cancer. Having regular smear tests therefore helps to prevent cervical cancer from developing by allowing early treatment of the abnormal cells before they become cancer. This is the only screening test available and it is only for cervical cancer.

It is often assumed that smear tests will also protect against the other cancers such as ovarian and endometrial cancer. However, this is not the case. Regular smear tests will not detect ovarian, endometrial, vulval or vaginal cancer. Unfortunately there are currently no screening tests for these other gynaecological cancers. Being aware of the signs and symptoms, noticing when something is abnormal or 'not quite right', and seeking medical advice promptly is very important.



## What can I do to help reduce the risk of developing gynaecological cancer?

### 1. Reducing exposure to the HPV virus

Practicing safe sex (e.g. using condoms) with all sexual partners will reduce the risk of exposure to HPV. Use of the HPV vaccine by girls before they

become sexually active can also help to protect them from HPV infection and thereby from developing vulval, vaginal and cervical cancers.

### 2. Quit smoking

As is the case with most cancers, smoking increases the risk of developing gynaecological cancer and cervical cancer in particular. Stopping now may start to reduce your risk and will help to improve your general health. For more information please visit [www.quit.org.nz](http://www.quit.org.nz)

### 3. A healthy diet and regular physical activity

Being overweight can increase the risk of developing some gynaecological cancers.

### 4. Keeping up to date with your cervical smear tests

Having regular cervical smear tests (every three years or more frequently if advised by your doctor), from the age of 20, will help prevent cervical cancer from developing.