A Comprehensive Look at the Early Detection of Ovarian Cancer

Jennifer O’Rourke, RN, MS, APN, and Suzanne M. Mahon, RN, DNSc, AOCN®, APGN

Ovarian cancer is the leading cause of gynecologic cancer deaths and the fifth leading cause of cancer deaths among American women. Advances in surgery and treatment modalities have slightly improved five-year survival rates, but the prognosis for most women continues to be poor. Rectovaginal examination, ultrasound, and the CA-125 blood test are three modalities currently used to screen for ovarian cancer, although no universal ovarian cancer screening guidelines are recommended for the general population. Developments in the early detection of ovarian cancer are emerging and include blood tests that could lead to identifying asymptomatic, early-stage ovarian cancer. Nurses should be knowledgeable about these developments in ovarian cancer as they educate women about ovarian cancer risk, prevention, and early detection.

Key Words: ovarian neoplasms, CA-125 antigen, ultrasonography

Epidemiology

The majority of cases of ovarian cancer are diagnosed in an advanced stage because it presents with few, if any, distinctive symptoms. These subtle symptoms may include abdominal bloating and discomfort; dyspepsia; changes in bowel or bladder function, including constipation and urge urinary incontinence; and unexplained weight loss or gain. These symptoms are fairly vague and often are seen only after the extensive spread of ovarian cancer. Symptoms often are so subtle that they are dismissed or misdiagnosed by healthcare providers. Because of a lack of specific or early warning symptoms, the accurate detection of early-stage disease remains a challenge (Ozols, Robboy, Rubin, & Thomas, 1997). Figure 1 includes some epidemiologic facts about ovarian cancer.

Risk Factors

The first step in evaluating a woman’s risk for ovarian cancer is a thorough review of her personal and family health history. Women...