

Fighting Back Against Cancers Affecting Women

Several advancements in recent years are helping more women beat cervical, uterine, ovarian and other gynecologic cancers. And more help may be on the horizon.

Since the 1950s, PAP tests have saved the lives of tens of thousands of women in the United States. Nowadays, doctors and patients have a much broader arsenal to fight cervical cancer and other cancers of the female reproductive system, including ovarian and uterine cancers.

"We no longer view these cancers as death sentences. Patients are living longer and with a higher quality of life," says Dr. Antonella Leary, a gynecologic oncologist with Florida Cancer Specialists & Research Institute (FCS).

Dr. Leary and colleague Dr. Howard Goodman point to several advancements in recent years that are helping women prevent cancer or treat it earlier and more effectively.





Some of these breakthroughs include:

- The increased use of the HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccine, which has drastically reduced the occurrence of cervical cancers, while other types of immunotherapy are helping curb some other forms of cancer
- Minimally-invasive surgeries, including robotics, with less pain and shorter recovery times
- DNA analysis that can help pinpoint the best treatment for shrinking or eliminating cancerous tumors
- Ongoing research involving a growing number of clinical trials, expected to yield new drugs and treatment options

Cervical Cancers on the Decline

Mortality from cervical cancer, once one of the most common causes of cancer deaths among women, has declined by more than 50 percent over the past several decades, with standard PAP test screenings and more recently, the widespread acceptance of the HPV vaccine, according to the American Cancer Society.

“The HPV vaccine has been a tremendous addition to the treatment and prevention of cervical cancer,” says Dr. Leary, who practices at the FCS location in Palm Beach Gardens.

Dr. Goodman, an FCS gynecologic oncologist who practices in West Palm Beach, agrees. “Every female age nine to 12 should be vaccinated with the HPV vaccine,” he says, adding that there are no known drawbacks to the vaccine other than a temporary discomfort at the injection site.

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The preventive measure is one of several forms of immunotherapy that enhance the ability of the body's immune system to fight off tumors. Others cancer inhibitors, known as PDL1 and PD1, "have been used with some success in endometrial cancer and cervical cancer, but we are just starting to see the results of [clinical] trials using these drugs for these diseases," Dr. Goodman added.

Less-Invasive Surgeries and Robotics

The science of how best to treat tumors continues to improve.

"The use of minimally-invasive techniques, such as laparoscopy and robotics, has changed surgical practices and become the standard of care, especially as it relates to treatments of uterine cancers," Dr. Goodman says.

Adds Dr. Leary, "We have now adopted robotics for most endometrial cancers, which allows for shorter recovery, less incisional pain and a quicker return to work. We have also started adopting minimally invasive surgery in early-stage and some interval surgeries for ovarian cancer. This allows quicker time to begin adjuvant [additional] treatment, if necessary, with patients starting chemotherapy earlier."

For some cancers, however, less invasive procedures haven't proven as successful.

"Women with cervical cancer have improved survivals when a radical hysterectomy is done with open surgery as opposed to something that's minimally invasive," Dr. Goodman says. "Virtually all centers have gone back to open surgery for a radical hysterectomy."

DNA Tests Guide Treatment Options

Getting a better understanding of a patient's DNA, or genome, is helping the medical community treat a variety of cancers of the reproductive system. Long gone are the days when all ovarian and endometrial cancers were treated similarly. Today, DNA tests on tumors can help doctors choose the best course of treatment.

By identifying genetic abnormalities or mutations that cause tumors to grow, doctors can target the

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Florida Cancer Specialists

harmful cells with drugs known as PARP inhibitors and other cancer-fighting therapies that kill cancer cells and reduce tumor growth.

"All ovarian and Fallopian tube cancer patients should be genetically tested, as we are finding new and innovative treatments, or PARP inhibitors, with excellent responses," Dr. Leary says. "The tests often reveal harmful genetic mutations known as BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 linked to tumor growth."

Lynch syndrome is another genetic mutation which can lead to an increase in colon, uterine and early ovarian carcinomas, Dr. Leary noted. "Some of these cancers are preventable with early detection and screening, thus a good family history and testing are recommended," she says.

Genetic testing also benefits a patient's siblings and offspring, often helping them decide whether to take preventive measures if they, too, carry a potentially cancer-causing gene mutation. For example, women who carry the BRCA 1 or BRCA 2 mutation can reduce their risk of developing breast cancer by 95 percent by opting for a so-called "prophylactic mastectomy" - elective surgery to have one or both breasts removed before tumors can develop, according to the National Cancer Institute.



Antonella Leary, MD
Gynecologic Oncologist

Early Signs of Ovarian Cancer



Ovarian cancer remains one of the most challenging cancers to treat because early detection is difficult.

With no reliable medical tests to screen for the disease in its earliest stages, experts recommend that women and their doctors be aware of possible indications of the often-deadly disease.

“Ovarian and Fallopian tube cancers are hard to find at an early stage and thus harder to treat. That’s why patients need to be educated on the signs and symptoms,” says Dr. Antonella Leary, a gynecologic oncologist with FCS.

Early on, patients may experience abdominal bloating, changes in bowel or bladder habits, and abdominal pain and pressure, she said. Dr. Leary concedes that these symptoms are “all very vague, but if they persist, it could be a sign of something wrong.”

FCS gynecologic oncologist Dr. Howard Goodman adds that ovarian cancer has a reputation as a “silent killer.” He explains, “Frequently women notice some issue, but the signs are subtle or nonspecific, hence they are not brought to [a doctor’s] attention. Typical complaints are bloating, early satiety [fullness when eating], increasing abdominal size, constipation and urinary frequency or menstrual pattern change.

“Ninety-nine percent of the time when a patient has these complaints, it is not ovarian cancer, but the doctor should be aware to keep this disease in mind.”



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“Genetic mutations are familial,” Dr. Leary says. “If you carry one, you should share these results with others in your family to allow for them to get tested.

“Prophylactic surgeries that we recommend are a hysterectomy and removal of the ovaries and Fallopian tubes if they carry the BRCA 1 mutation, and removal of the ovaries and Fallopian tubes for BRCA 2, both by the age of 35 or after child-bearing. We also recommend a hysterectomy and removal of the ovaries and Fallopian tubes by the age of 50 for women with Lynch syndrome.”

Promising New Research, Clinical Trials

Ongoing medical research offers additional hope for beating the various cancers of a woman's reproductive tract. “More widespread genomic testing may bring to light a genetic abnormality that we can target,” Dr. Goodman says. “Doctors are increasingly turning to treatments based on the characteristics of the tumor, rather than strictly focusing on its point of origin,” he said.

Some clinical trials currently underway are showing encouraging results in preventing or treating endometrial and cervical cancers, he added. Scientists are also at work developing better screening tests for ovarian cancer, which has been historically hard to detect in its early stages.

Healthy Lifestyles and Positive Attitudes are Important

Still, despite the recent advancements, health-care professionals are concerned that endometrial and uterine cancers are on the rise, partly the result of unhealthy lifestyles. “For uterine cancer, we know that obesity is a significant risk factor,” Dr. Goodman says. “Encouraging a healthy diet and exercise will help reduce the incidence of this disease.”

In an interview earlier this year with Prevention Online magazine, Dr. Leary pointed out that regardless of what type of cancer patients face, their mindset goes a long way in improving their outcome. “I strongly believe that going into treatment of any disease with a positive mindset and low stress level is optimal,” she says. “Stress and negative thoughts can hinder and prolong recovery and make it much harder to get through treatment.” +