

Ovaries

Some women I have met have admitted that they don't understand how important our ovaries are.

- Most of us have 2 ovaries, although some women only have 1.
- The ovaries maintain the health of the female reproductive system. They have 2 main purposes, producing eggs which is known as 'ovulation' and hormone production which means they are part of our endocrine system.
- They secrete 3 main hormones:
 - oestrogen
 - testosterone
 - progesterone

We have 1 ovary either side of our uterus, located very low down in the pelvis. They are oval shaped and the size of a small grape in most women and have a rich blood supply.

Our ovaries get smaller and start producing less eggs and hormones as we transition through the perimenopause, then stop altogether after the menopause. This commonly happens in our 40's but for some women they can be damaged by infection, drugs or our own immune system too which can mean these women enter the perimenopause and menopause sooner.

Diseases associated with the ovaries include ovarian cysts, ovarian cancer, and polycystic ovarian syndrome.

Ovarian Cancer.

Ovarian cancer is an extremely serious, but rare, disease. Its symptoms usually don't become apparent until the cancer has progressed into the later stages. The majority of cancers affect older women but younger women can get mostly benign cancers too.

Symptoms of ovarian cancer include: persistent abdominal pain, indigestion, bloating, abnormal bleeding, and pain during sexual intercourse. These are common problems, so in the great majority of cases, they will not indicate cancer. However, it's important you pay attention to your body and discuss anything out of the ordinary—no matter how insignificant you think it may be—with your doctor. Often an examination, blood tests and an ultrasound can rule this out and many cancers turn out to be benign too.

Ovarian Cysts

Ovarian cysts are fluid-filled sacs that affect women of all ages, though mostly women of child-bearing age. Cysts are very common—and they can range in size from a pea to a grapefruit. The majority of cysts are harmless, though larger cysts (those larger than 5 cm in diameter) may need to be surgically removed because large cysts can twist the ovary and disrupt its blood supply. Cysts can also present with pain, bloating, period changes and pain during intercourse. The pain associated with cysts often changes with your menstrual cycle but sometimes they can burst or twist leading to extreme pain and people ending up being admitted to hospital.

Cysts can form for a variety of reasons, often, they're simply part of normal menstruation. You may experience no symptoms, and the cysts will go away after a few cycles. These are known as functional cysts.

The great majority of cysts are benign. But abnormal or pathological cysts, such as those in polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), may cause painful symptoms.

Cysts may be diagnosed after an examination, blood tests and ultrasound or MRI scans.

Treatment for ovarian cysts depends on the size and type of cyst. If you're experiencing pain, talk to your doctor. He or she will determine what treatment is best for you.

Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

Polycystic means "many cysts." And may be suspected in women who are having irregular periods or have symptoms such as excessive hair growth, are obese or are struggling to get pregnant. They may also present as large cysts as we have already discussed.

PCOS is essentially caused by a hormone imbalance - many of the symptoms are caused by increased production of androgens. These patients usually have high free-testosterone levels.

It's not uncommon for those diagnosed with PCOS to be overweight and have type 2 diabetes. Many of the symptoms of PCOS fade with weight loss.

As you can see, the ovaries have an immensely important role not only in the female reproductive system but, in the endocrine system as a whole. The hormones they secrete ensure the proper development of the female body and promote healthy fertility. However, when they stop producing oestrogen this causes all sorts of symptoms and has many long term health risks such as osteoporosis, an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and dementia. The best treatment for this is hormone replacement therapy.