

Patient education: Ovarian cancer (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is ovarian cancer? — Ovarian cancer happens when normal cells in the ovary change into abnormal cells and grow out of control. The ovaries are organs that are part of a woman's reproductive system. A woman's eggs are in the ovaries ([figure 1](#)).

Ovarian cancer occurs most often in women ages 50 to 65, and sometimes runs in families.

What are the symptoms of ovarian cancer? — Symptoms of ovarian cancer can include:

- Your stomach getting bigger
- Feeling bloated or having stomach pain
- Feeling full or having trouble eating
- Needing to urinate often

When ovarian cancer begins to grow, some women might not notice their symptoms much. But as the cancer grows, the symptoms become worse.

These symptoms can also be caused by conditions that are not ovarian cancer. But if you have these symptoms, you should let your doctor or nurse know.

Is there a test for ovarian cancer? — Yes. If your doctor suspects you have ovarian cancer, he or she might order 1 or more of the following:

- **Ultrasound or other imaging tests** – These tests create images of the inside of the body and can show abnormal growths.
- **Blood tests** – There are several blood tests that can help diagnose ovarian cancer. They include tests called CA 125, OVA1, and Risk of Malignancy Algorithm (also called ROMA). These tests can also help doctors decide whether they need to do surgery to diagnose ovarian cancer.
- **Surgery** – The only way to know for sure if a woman has ovarian cancer is for a doctor to do surgery and remove the ovary. While the surgery is going on, usually another doctor will look at cells from the ovary under a microscope to check for cancer. If cancer is present, the doctor will usually continue surgery and treat the cancer by removing as much of it as possible. Most of the time, this involves doing a surgery called "total hysterectomy with salpingo-oophorectomy" ([figure 2](#)). For this surgery, the doctor removes the ovaries, the tubes that connect the ovaries to the uterus (called the fallopian tubes), and the uterus. If the cancer has spread to other nearby organs, the doctor might remove those, too.

What is cancer staging? — Cancer staging is a way in which doctors find out how far a cancer has spread.

How is ovarian cancer treated? — For most women, having surgery to remove the cancer is the first part of treatment. Further treatment will depend a lot on the stage of the cancer, a woman's age, and her other medical problems. Some women might not need any further treatment after surgery. Other women might need further treatment that includes chemotherapy. Chemotherapy is the medical term for medicines that kill cancer cells or stop them from growing. Usually, these medicines go into a vein. But sometimes they can go through a small tube into the lower part of the stomach.

What if I want to get pregnant one day? — If you want to have a baby one day, tell your doctor before having treatment. Treatment for ovarian cancer usually leaves a woman unable to get pregnant. But for some women it might be possible to plan treatment so that pregnancy is still possible.

What happens after treatment? — After treatment, you will be checked every so often to see if the cancer comes back. Follow up tests usually include blood tests, exams, and imaging tests. You should also watch for the symptoms listed above, because having those symptoms could mean the cancer has come back. Tell your doctor or nurse if you have any symptoms.

What happens if the cancer comes back or spreads? — If the cancer comes back or spreads, you might have more surgery or chemotherapy. You might also have a medicine called targeted therapy, which can help prevent cancer growth.

Can ovarian cancer be prevented? — If ovarian, breast, uterine, or colon cancer runs in your family, talk to your doctor. There might be things you can do to keep from getting cancer.

What else should I do? — It is important to follow all your doctors' instructions about visits and tests. It's also important to talk to your doctor about any side effects or problems you have during treatment.

Getting treated for ovarian cancer involves making many choices, such as what treatment to have.

Always let your doctors and nurses know how you feel about a treatment. Any time you are offered a treatment, ask:

- What are the benefits of this treatment? Is it likely to help me live longer? Will it reduce or prevent symptoms?
- What are the downsides to this treatment?
- Are there other options besides this treatment?
- What happens if I do not have this treatment?

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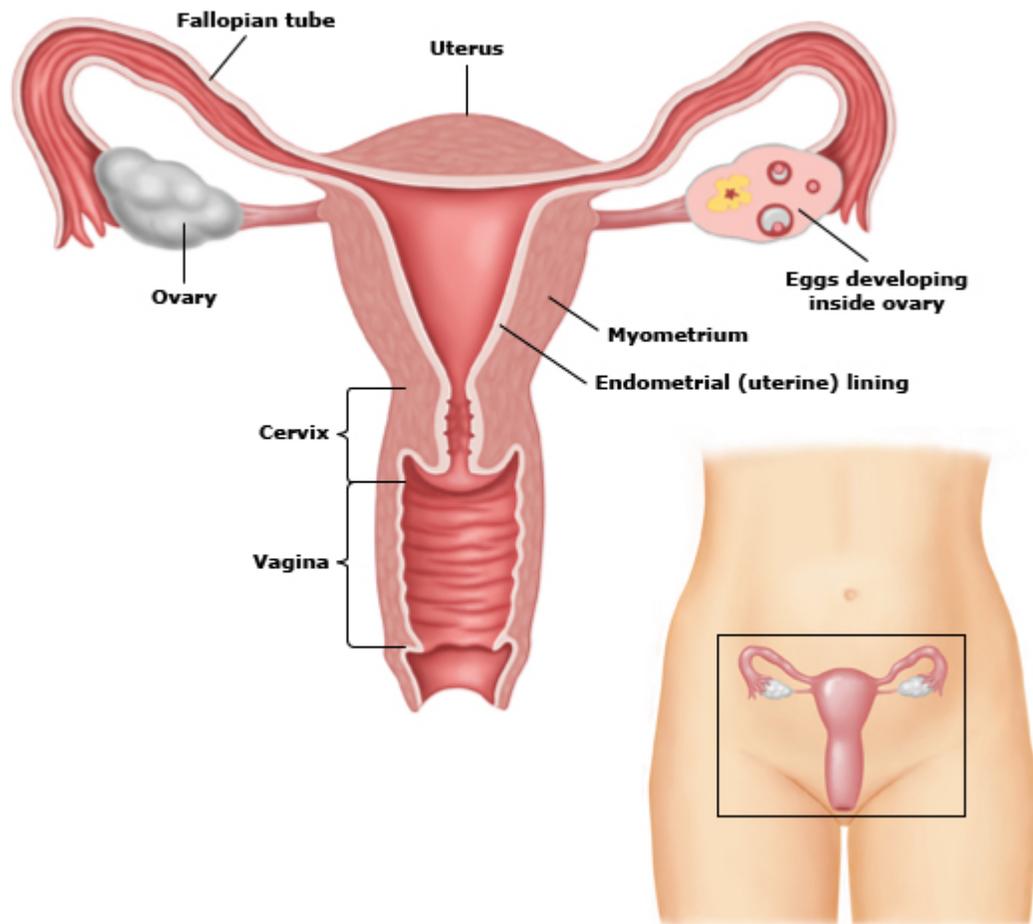
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GRAPHICS

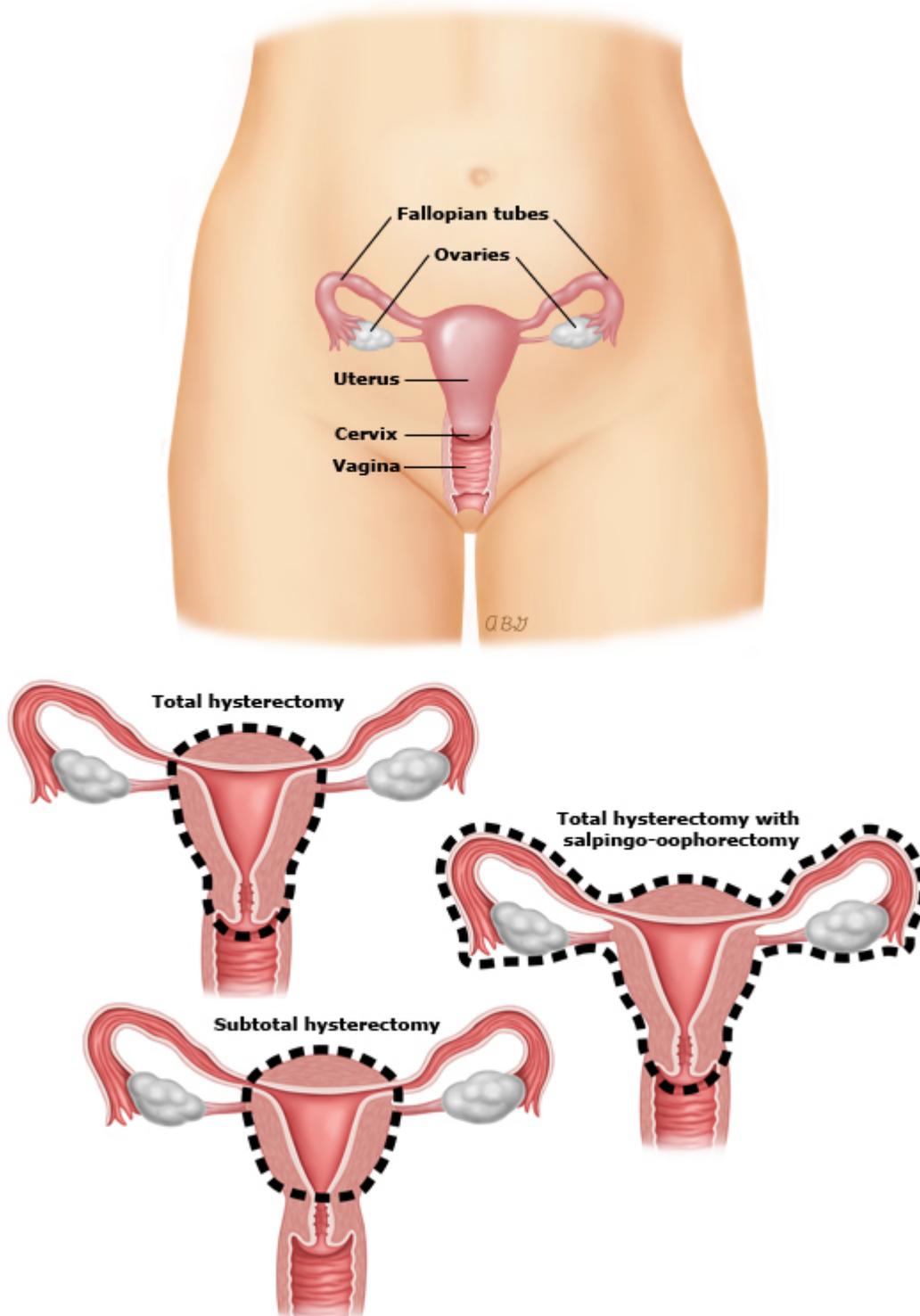
Female reproductive anatomy



These are the internal organs that make up a woman's reproductive system.

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Types of abdominal hysterectomy



In an abdominal hysterectomy, the doctor removes the uterus through an opening in the belly. If it is a "total hysterectomy" the doctor also removes the cervix. If it is a "subtotal" or "supracervical" hysterectomy, the doctor removes the uterus but leaves the cervix in place. To do this surgery, doctors sometimes make a horizontal cut (from left to right) at the bikini line. Sometimes they instead make a vertical cut from top to bottom. As part of a hysterectomy,

doctors sometimes also remove the ovaries and the tubes that connect the ovaries to the uterus (fallopian tubes). This is called "salpingo-oophorectomy".

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