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Imaging tests for ovarian cysts

When you need an ultrasound—and when you don't

Most ovarian cysts are small sacs, filled with fluid, on your ovaries. These are called “simple” ovarian cysts.

If your health-care provider finds an unexpected cyst or enlarged ovary during a pelvic exam, you should have a vaginal ultrasound to assess for cancer. However, many women have follow-up ultrasound exams to make sure that cancer doesn't grow later. Most of the time those extra exams are not needed. Here's why:

Most ovarian cysts are low-risk and can be ignored.

A simple ovarian cyst often forms as part of the normal menstrual cycle. About one in five women who are past menopause also get them. These cysts are small and usually do not cause symptoms. And they usually do not turn out to be cancerous in women of any age.

Research has shown that if the cyst does not show signs of cancer, cancer is not likely to grow later. For that reason, it is safe to ignore the cyst after the first vaginal ultrasound, as long as it does not start to cause symptoms, such as pelvic pain.

Ultrasound is safe, but follow-up can have risks.

During an ultrasound, a slender instrument is placed inside the vagina and sound waves are used to create pictures. An ultrasound exam does not



expose you to radiation. And it is not costly. So repeating it may seem harmless.

But being called back a few weeks or months after the first ultrasound to check the cyst again may cause anxiety. And by then you may be in a new menstrual cycle. The old cyst may have gone away on its own. But a new cyst may have formed, which can lead to a follow-up ultrasound on the new one.

These rounds of ultrasound can also lead to unnecessary surgery to remove a cyst or ovary. For instance, some doctors take out cysts that do not appear to go away or that look bigger on follow-up tests, even though they would almost never become cancerous. The risks of this surgery include pain, bleeding, and infection.

The tests can be a waste of money.

A vaginal ultrasound can cost from \$250 to \$580 if you do not have health insurance. An operation to remove an ovarian cyst can cost from \$7,000 to \$10,000, according to health.costhelper.com.

This is money wasted if you do not need the follow-up ultrasound or the surgery.

So when should you have a follow-up ultrasound test?

You may need a follow-up ultrasound test, and sometimes surgery, if the first ultrasound shows that you have a large cyst or a cyst that may be cancerous. If a cyst could be cancerous, it should be removed right away. A surgeon who specializes in treating ovarian cancer should do the surgery. That type of surgeon is called a gynecologic oncologist.

Advice from Consumer Reports

How to manage ovarian cysts

Most ovarian cysts are harmless. But the following information can help you with any concerns you may have about ovarian cysts or cancer.

- **Get a high-quality vaginal ultrasound.** Radiologists, OB-GYNs, and Registered Diagnostic Medical Sonographers can perform the test. They should be accredited by the American College of Radiology or the American Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine. If the entire cyst cannot be seen on a vaginal ultrasound, you should also have an abdominal ultrasound.

- **Consider taking birth control pills.** They can prevent new cysts from forming. However, they do not make existing cysts go away.

- **Call your health-care provider.** If you have sudden, severe lower abdominal pain, especially with vomiting or nausea, call your doctor right away. It may mean that a cyst has burst or has twisted an ovary.



- **If you need surgery, have the right kind.** Most cysts can be removed with laparoscopy. During laparoscopy, two or three very small cuts are made in the abdomen to remove the cyst or cysts. A cyst that may be cancerous might require abdominal surgery and a larger cut.

- **Know the signs of ovarian cancer.** They include a swollen or bloated abdomen, pressure or pain in the abdomen, trouble eating, or feeling full quickly. If these signs don't go away, happen often, or get worse, call your health-care provider.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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