



X-Plain™

Ovarian Cysts

Reference Summary

Introduction

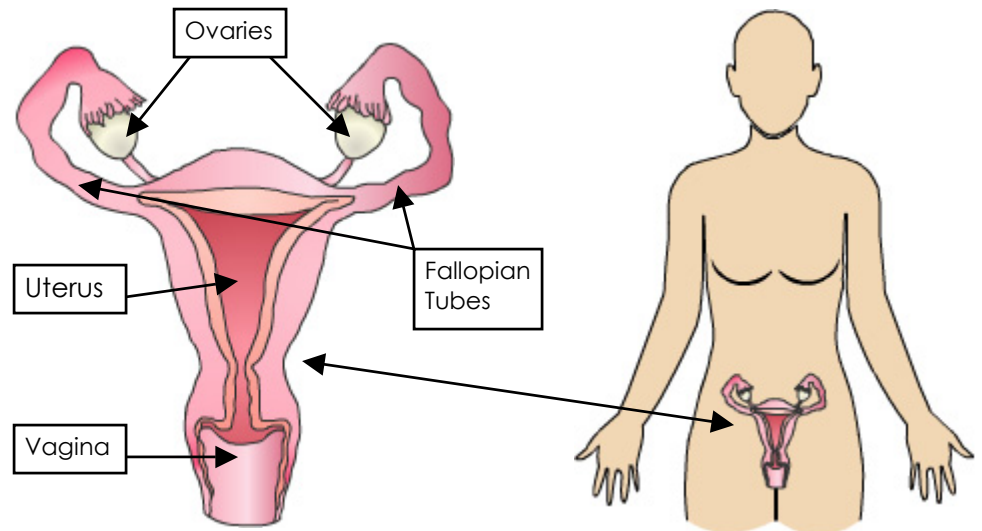
Ovarian cysts are a very common female condition. An ovarian cyst is a fluid-filled sac on an ovary in the female reproductive system.

Most women have ovarian cysts sometime during their lives. Fortunately, most ovarian cysts are benign and do not need any special treatment. This reference summary will help you understand ovarian cysts and how they may be diagnosed and treated.

Anatomy

The female reproductive organs include:

- the vagina
- the uterus
- the fallopian tubes
- the ovaries



The female reproductive organs are located in the pelvis, between the urinary bladder and the rectum.

The ovaries have 2 main functions:

- The production of specialized hormones, such as estrogen and progesterone.
- Ovulation, which is the release of eggs that are needed for reproduction.

The hormones produced by the ovaries are very important in keeping ovulation regular. These hormones also prepare the inner lining of the uterus to proceed with a pregnancy. Before the egg is released a small cyst forms on the ovary. A cyst is a fluid-filled area. When the egg is released, it goes down to the uterus through the fallopian tube, where it may be fertilized. The cyst on the ovary usually disappears at

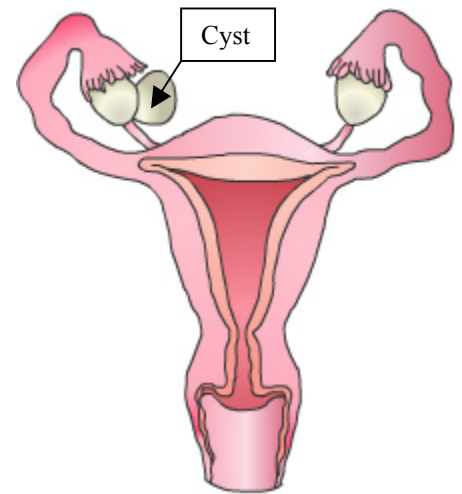
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that time. If the egg is not fertilized, the egg and the inner lining of the uterus are discharged to the outside of the body during the menstrual period. This cycle repeats itself every 28 days, while the ovaries are still active.

The uterus is pear shaped. It is about 3 inches long and it has 3 layers. The inner layer of the uterus is called the endometrium.

Causes

An ovarian cyst is a fluid-filled tissue sac that appears on the ovary. The sac can be within or on the surface of the ovary. Some cysts fail to release the egg and can grow up to 1 or 2 inches. These cysts are called follicular cysts. They usually disappear in 2 - 3 menstrual cycles. Some cysts are called Corpus Luteum cysts. These occur after the egg has been released. They can grow up to 4 inches in size. They usually also disappear within a few weeks.



Other ovarian cysts are due to benign tumors. A benign tumor is a tumor that does not invade other tissues and is not cancerous. These include:

- Dermoid cysts
- Endometriomas
- Cystadenomas
- Polycystic ovaries

Dermoid cysts. The cells in the ovary are able to make hair, teeth, and other growing tissues that become part of a forming ovarian cyst. These cysts can become large and cause pain.

Endometriomas. These cysts develop in women who have endometriosis, when tissue from the lining of the uterus grows outside of the uterus. The tissue may attach to the ovary and form a growth. These cysts can be painful during sexual intercourse and during menstruation.

Cystadenomas. These cysts develop from cells on the outer surface of the ovary. They are often filled with a watery fluid or thick, sticky gel. They can become large and cause pain.

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Polycystic ovaries. The eggs mature within the follicles, or sacs, but the sac doesn't break open to release the egg. The cycle repeats, follicles continue to grow inside the ovary, and cysts form. In this case increased body hair may be noticed by the patient.

Some benign ovarian cysts may increase the risk of ovarian cancer. Malignant tumors, or cancer of the ovaries, can start as a cyst on the ovaries.

Symptoms

Some ovarian cysts may cause no symptoms, while others do cause some symptoms. Common symptoms of ovarian cysts include:

- Pain in the abdomen or pelvis. If the pain becomes extremely severe, it might mean that the cyst is twisting the ovary or that there is bleeding in the cyst itself. These conditions may need urgent medical care.
- Another symptom is severe pain around the time of the menstrual period.
- Pain during sexual intercourse is another symptom.
- Pain upon going to the bathroom. This could happen because the cyst is putting pressure on the bladder or rectum. This pressure can also cause some women to feel like they have to go to the bathroom often.
- Fullness or extra weight in the abdominal area.
- Symptoms similar to pregnancy including nausea, vomiting, or fever may also be experienced. These symptoms require immediate medical attention.



Increased body hair may be a sign of polycystic ovaries.

Diagnosis

A detailed medical history and a thorough pelvic examination are essential in detecting and diagnosing ovarian cysts. Your doctor may be able to feel an ovarian cyst when he or she feels the area on your abdomen near the ovaries.

Ultrasound of the pelvis may also be needed to determine the location and the size of ovarian cysts. A CAT scan of the pelvis and abdomen may be needed. Blood tests

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can help your doctor determine whether a cyst could be cancerous. CA-125 is a chemical that is found in the blood of patients with ovarian cancer. However, not all patients who have that substance in their blood have ovarian cancer.

And not all patients with ovarian cancer have high levels of CA-125.

Other blood tests may be done to check for pregnancy and other female hormones.

Laparoscopy, or looking inside the abdomen with scopes, may be necessary. This is usually an outpatient surgical procedure. During laparoscopy, the doctor may take a sample tissue for analysis by a pathologist under a microscope. This is called a biopsy.

Treatment

Treatment of ovarian cysts depends on the age of the patient, the size of the cyst, and the symptoms. Small cysts in young patients who have not reached menopause yet may not need treatment. The gynecologist will follow these patients to make sure the cyst disappears on its own. Women who tend to form frequent functional cysts may be put on birth control pills. Birth control pills stop the ovaries from functioning and, therefore, prevent further cysts from developing. Big cysts, cysts that have serious symptoms, or cysts in older post-menopause patients may need to be taken out to relieve symptoms and to make sure they are not cancerous. Cysts can be taken out using laparoscopy or by an open operation called laparotomy.



Summary

Ovarian cysts are fluid-filled sacs in the ovaries. Most women have ovarian cysts sometime during their lives. Fortunately, most ovarian cysts are benign and do not need any special treatment.

Recognizing the symptoms of ovarian cysts is important to avoid complications.

Thanks to medical advances, several options are available to you and your doctor to diagnose and treat ovarian cysts, which do not disappear on their own or that cause you discomfort.



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