

Help! I have a Cyst on my Ovary!

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The concept of an ovarian cyst can be frightening. What many women do not understand is that developing one or more ovarian cysts each month is a very natural occurrence. These normal cysts are called functional ovarian cysts.

The development of an ovarian cyst is caused by slight changes in the way the ovary produces or releases an egg. During the normal monthly menstrual cycle two distinct types of cysts can be formed.

A follicular cyst develops in the first part or the follicular phase of the menstrual cycle. If the developing egg sack does not release an egg, the cyst swells.

A luteal cyst develops after ovulation, in the latter part of the cycle. This is the most common type of ovarian cyst.

Other ovarian growths

The development of functional cysts is directly related to ovulation. But there are other types of ovarian cysts and growths caused by other conditions. An ovarian growth can be a noncancerous (benign) cystic tumor. Other types of non cancerous growths can be related to endometriosis. Some can be associated with ovarian cancer.

Menopause and Ovarian Cysts

But what if I have gone through menopause? How can I have a cyst when my ovaries are not working any longer? At one time it was commonly believed that once you were in the menopause, all ovarian function ceased. Now we know that this is not true. The ovaries continue to develop cysts that produce estrogen for several years after your last menstrual flow.

The question of whether or not ovarian cysts that develop after menopause can be a threat to your health was addressed by a study conducted by the National Cancer Institute.

The purpose of the study was to determine how many women, over 55 years of age, were experiencing the development of simple ovarian cysts and how the body managed to deal with the cysts. Since the incidence of ovarian cancer increases as we age, of special concern was whether or not the cysts a menopausal woman produces would be more likely to become cancerous. (This information was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology, Chicago, IL, 2008. The results of the study were published online January 25, 2010.)

For most studies to be considered valid, a large group of women should be evaluated. Simple cysts were found in 15,735 women from the intervention arm of the Prostate, Lung, Colorectal, and Ovarian Cancer Screening Trial through 4 years of transvaginal ultrasound screening.

Simple cysts were seen in 14% of women the first time that their ovaries were visualized. Twelve months later, an additional 8% of women were found to have simple ovarian cysts. Of those women who had a simple cyst the first time they were screened, 54% retained 1 simple cyst, and 32% had no cyst 1 year later. Simple cysts did not increase risk of subsequent invasive ovarian cancer.

Though the concept of a menopausal ovarian cyst may seem frightening, the study concluded that simple ovarian cysts are fairly common among menopausal women, and most simple cysts appear stable or resolve by the next annual examination. As a result of these findings, recommendations have been made for medical practitioners to follow the cyst, not surgically remove it.

Regardless of a woman's age there are often steps, other than surgery, that can be taken to suppress a simple cyst, if it is bothersome.

For more information, consult your provider.