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Uterine Cancer: the most curable Gynecologic cancer

by Dr. Howard Saul

“Why is uterine cancer considered the most curable of the gynecologic cancers?”

Many women ask these and other common questions about uterine cancer each day. In this article, I will answer some of the most common questions and concerns women have about the most common of the gynecologic cancers.

How common is uterine cancer?

It is estimated that 43,470 women will be stricken with uterine cancer and 7,950 women will die of this disease in 2010. This cancer is rarely hereditary. Uterine cancer may be associated with hereditary colon cancer. Giving a thorough family history to your doctor is very important. New testing is available to screen for increased inherited genetic risk for colon and uterine cancer. This simple blood test is available at the Center for Cancer. Please call 856-673-0015 and our friendly staff would be glad to assist you in making an appointment for counseling or genetic testing.

Why is this cancer usually curable?

The reason is that uterine cancer usually presents as abnormal uterine (most often as postmenopausal) bleeding. This usually prompts women to seek medical attention right away. It is then that the cancer can be found in the earliest stage when the cure rate is high. The important message is that all abnormal bleeding should be reported to your doctor promptly, even if it should stop. It is important to note that the Pap smear is a poor screening test for this cancer. So don't think that you are fine because your pap smear was normal.

What causes and risk factors exist for uterine cancer?

The most common cause for this cancer is unopposed estrogen, whether this occurs naturally or artificially. Many women now are on hormone replacement therapy after menopause. It is important that those women who still have a uterus be given a progesterone agent along with the estrogen. This will reduce their risk of getting this cancer. Please discuss this issue with your doctor. Overweight women naturally have more estrogen in their bodies. The reason for this is that estrogen is produced in the fat cells. This puts them at increased risk for uterine cancer as well as for other medical disorders.

How can I reduce my risk for uterine cancer?

Women who are overweight should start a weight reduction program under the supervision of their physician. Women who are taking the oral contraceptive pill have approximately 50% reduced risk for uterine, as well as ovarian cancer.

How is uterine cancer diagnosed?

Most cases can be diagnosed by an office endometrial biopsy. This simple procedure takes only a few minutes to perform and causes minimal discomfort. Some patients may require a D & C (scraping the inner lining of the uterus) and hysteroscopy (looking into the uterus with a small telescope) to make the diagnosis. These procedures are usually done as an outpatient in a same day surgery center.

What is the usual treatment for uterine cancer?

Usually most women with uterine cancer require the removal of the uterus, fallopian tubes and the ovaries (which is called a hysterectomy). Many women may also require lymph node dissection at the time of the hysterectomy. Typically, most women are cured with surgery only, although some patients may require radiation, hormonal treatment or chemotherapy.

I've heard a lot about Robotic Surgery. Am I a candidate for Robotic Surgery?

Many gynecologic cancers can be treated with da Vinci Robotic Surgery. Ask your doctor if Robotic Surgery makes sense for you.

What is the follow up program for women who have had uterine cancer treatment?

It is vital that women who have had treatment for uterine cancer have routine follow up visits with their doctor. The reason is that recurrent uterine cancer may be curable when picked up early. It is important to have regular Pap smears after treatment. Although the Pap smear is a poor test for making the diagnosis of initial uterine cancer, it is a valuable and inexpensive tool in helping to make the diagnosis of a recurrence.

How can I participate in a clinical trial in uterine cancer?

There are many open clinical trials uterine cancer. We at the Center for Cancer are actively involved in national cooperative research groups, such as the Gynecologic Oncology Group (GOG) as well as many industry trials. You may be eligible for participation in some of the latest trials. We would be glad to discuss research treatment options with you.

Do I have to go to a big medical center in Philadelphia to get the best treatment for uterine cancer?

No. Here in South Jersey patients can receive the exact same "state of the art treatment" for uterine cancer as in the major cancer centers without leaving the safety and security of their hometown. This approach makes cancer treatment easier for the patient and her family. The latest research studies are also available and can be done locally as well.

What is a gynecologic oncologist and how can one help me?

A Gynecologic Oncologist is a physician who has taken special fellowship training in the treatment of female pelvic cancers. They are trained in all surgical as well as medical aspects involved in the treatment of the patient with gynecologic cancer and pre-cancerous conditions. The input of a gynecologic oncologist can be a very important addition to your medical team. They are also available for advice and second opinions.

Are there any dumb questions that I shouldn't ask my doctor?

No. The only dumb questions are those that you do not ask. It is easy to forget an important question while you are in the doctor's office, so I encourage patients and family to try to write down questions ahead of time and ask them as they pop in to your mind. Don't ever be afraid to ask.

About Dr. Saul

Dr. Howard Saul is a board certified gynecologic oncologist. He lives in Cherry Hill with his wife Gail. He has 2 children, Michael and Lauren, a son-in-law, Yisroel, and two grandsons, Shneur Zalman and Dov Ber. He has been treating women with gynecologic cancer in South Jersey for over 20 years. His philosophy of practice is to deliver the latest in cancer care to the women of South Jersey. He is on the staff of many area hospitals. He has been involved in many pioneering cancer treatment studies, and is an active invited speaker at many medical meetings and cancer support groups. Most importantly, he believes in giving knowledge, hope, support, compassion and a friendly smile to the many women and their families facing cancer.

Questions? Dr. Saul welcomes your questions on any area of gynecologic oncology. Email him at: HMSAUL@centerforcancer.com.