Endometrial Cancer

Endometrial cancer, or cancer of the lining of the uterus (womb), is the fourth most common cancer in women in the United States. Each year, 37,000 to 39,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with endometrial (also known as uterine) cancer. Endometrial cancer most commonly develops in older women who are past their childbearing years. However, it can occur in younger women. Endometrial cancer is often a slowly growing cancer. It can be detected early because it usually produces vaginal bleeding. Women who experience abnormal bleeding, especially after menopause, should see their doctor because early detection can lead to successful treatment and cure of the cancer. The October 2, 2002, issue of JAMA includes an article about endometrial cancer.

Sources: American Cancer Society, Mayo Clinic, National Cancer Institute

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS

- Vaginal bleeding after menopause (most common symptom)
- Lower abdominal pain
- Heavy periods or bleeding between periods
- Weight loss

Women who have any of the symptoms or signs of endometrial cancer should see a doctor who treats diseases of the female reproductive system. Doctors who specialize in these problems are called gynecologists. A gynecologic oncologist is a doctor who specializes in cancers of the female reproductive system (uterus, ovaries, cervix, or vagina).

In addition to a physical examination, there are other tests that may be done. These include a dilation and curettage (also known as a D & C), a surgical procedure that scrapes the lining of the uterus; an ultrasound to see the shape and size of the uterus; hysteroscopy (a procedure to look inside the uterus); an endometrial biopsy (a tissue sample) to examine the lining of the uterus; and blood tests for anemia (low blood cell count).

TREATMENTS

- Hysterectomy (surgery to remove the uterus)
- Hysterectomy and bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy (surgery to remove the uterus, the fallopian tubes, and both ovaries)

Hysterectomy is major surgery and requires anesthesia. After having a hysterectomy, a woman is no longer able to bear children because the entire uterus is removed. Because endometrial cancer can be completely treated in many cases by a hysterectomy, surgery is usually recommended. If the cancer is advanced or has spread to other parts of the body, other treatments may be needed, such as radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or hormone therapy.

Sources: American Cancer Society, Mayo Clinic, National Cancer Institute

RISK FACTORS

- Age (average age at diagnosis is 60)
- Family history of uterine cancer (may be linked to colon cancer in some families)
- History of breast or ovarian cancer
- Unopposed estrogen therapy (without progesterin) or treatment with tamoxifen
- Obesity
- Diet high in animal fat
- Early start of menstruation or late menopause
- No pregnancies
- Obesity
- Diet high in animal fat
- Early start of menstruation or late menopause
- No pregnancies

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Cancer Institute
  800/4-CANCER (422-6237)
  www.cancer.gov/cancerinfo/types/endometrial
- American Cancer Society
  800/ACS-2345
  www.cancer.org
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
  www.acog.org

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA’s Web site at www.jama.com. They are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on ovarian cancer was published in the July 17, 2002, issue.