

MEDIA RELEASE

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Early detection test soon to become a reality, but symptom awareness remains key to timely diagnosis

In response to the landmark announcement today that a UK-led research team has demonstrated a survival benefit for the world's first early detection test for ovarian cancer, Ovarian Cancer Australia (OCA) said the result was a major turning point for ovarian cancer detection.

Director of Research and Advocacy at OCA, Dr Katherine Nielsen, said that the study provided new hope that early detection for ovarian cancer was possible. The study was led by Professor Ian Jacobs, a researcher and Vice Chancellor at the University of NSW.

“Prior to this study, the landscape was bleak for early detection, with many organisations globally making recommendations against screening for ovarian cancer,” said Dr Nielsen.

“Today, for the first time, results have shown that this screening strategy can save lives. Professor Jacobs’ research reported a 20 per cent reduction in mortality rates – a huge step forward in early detection for ovarian cancer.

“However, it remains to be seen whether the survival benefit is large enough and sufficiently cost effective to justify a population screen. Also, the screening strategy itself is more complex than a simple test, so there may be a need to simplify the process – and how this could be done is not yet clear.

“Even if a population screen is not justified, this approach may be useful for women who are at a higher risk of developing ovarian cancer.

“While we wait for improved early detection, symptom awareness is important as ever, and remains the key to achieving a timely diagnosis,” added Dr Nielsen.

The four common symptoms of ovarian cancer include: abdominal or pelvic pain; increased abdominal size or persistent abdominal bloating; the need to urinate often or urgently; and feeling full after eating a small amount.

Involving more than 200,000 post-menopausal women aged 50 to 74 from across the UK over 14 years, the study is one of the largest randomised trials ever conducted. Women were screened via a combination of ROCA, involving an annual blood test that uses a statistical calculation to interpret changing levels over time of a blood protein, CA125, which is linked to ovarian cancer and ultrasound imaging.

Evidence obtained through the trial suggests that screening women for ovarian cancer can reduce the number of women dying from the disease by an estimated 15 to 28 per cent.

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Ovarian cancer has the lowest survival rate of any women's cancer. If found in its early stages, women have an 80 per cent chance of being alive and well after five years. Unfortunately, 75 per cent of women are diagnosed in advanced stages, when it can become difficult to treat.

Approximately 1,500 Australian women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer every year, with over 1,000 succumbing to the disease. Only 43 per cent of women will survive five years post diagnosis, well below the average for all cancers.

February is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, an annual campaign to raise awareness and vital funds to support women and their families living with ovarian cancer. Visit www.ovariancancer.net.au for more information.

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NOTES:

A woman is considered to have a higher risk of ovarian cancer if she:

- has a family history of ovarian and breast cancer;
- has inherited the BRCA1 and/or BRCA2 gene mutations
- is over 50 years of age;
- has never had children, been unable to have children, or had children after 30;
- has never used oral contraceptives;
- has endometriosis;
- lifestyle factors: such as smoking tobacco, being overweight or eating a high fat diet; and
- hormonal factors: including early puberty (menstruating before 12) or late menopause (onset after 50 years of age).

About Ovarian Cancer Australia:

Ovarian Cancer Australia is the independent national organisation that takes action for people affected by ovarian cancer and was founded in 2001 by a group of people who had been affected by ovarian cancer, either themselves or through someone they loved. Ovarian Cancer Australia provides support for women and their families, raises community awareness of ovarian cancer, advocates for improved services for women and promotes and funds research. Ovarian Cancer Australia's vision is to save lives and ensure that no woman with ovarian cancer walks alone. Their work is guided by their core values of Optimism, Community and Accountability. In February 2015, Ovarian Cancer Australia announced their bold 25/25 Vision, a plan to achieve a 25 per cent improvement in the five year survival rate of ovarian cancer by 2025. Know Ovarian Cancer is an initiative to achieve the 25/25 Vision, consisting of a national awareness campaign, education and support programs, high impact research, and advocacy. For more information on the 25/25 Vision, please visit www.ovariancancer.net.au/2525vision