

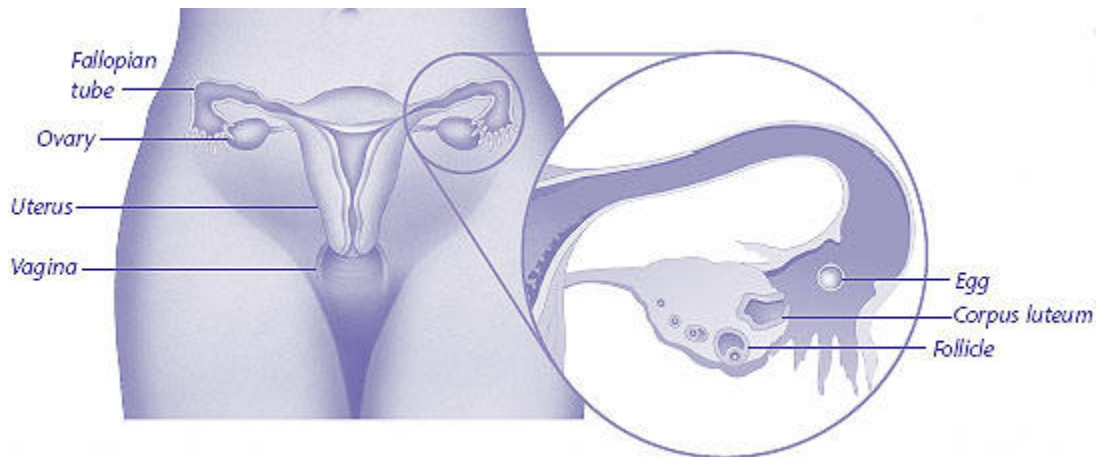


The Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology

Women's health promotion series

Ovarian Cysts

The **ovaries** are two small glands located on either side of a woman's uterus. They produce hormones that are necessary for a woman's body functions and they contain the eggs that are released at ovulation. An ovarian **cyst** is a sac or pocket filled with fluid or other tissue that forms on the ovary. It is normal for a small cyst to develop on the ovaries. In most cases, cysts are harmless and go away with time on their own. In other cases, they may cause problems and need treatment.



This pamphlet explains

- types of ovarian cysts
- symptoms
- diagnosis and treatment

Types of Cysts

Ovarian cysts are quite common in women during their menstruation years. A woman can develop one cyst or many cysts. Ovarian cysts can vary in size.

There are different types of ovarian cysts. Most cysts are **benign** (not cancerous). Rarely, a few cysts may turn out to be **malignant** (cancerous). For this reason, all cysts should be checked by your health care provider.

Functional Cysts

The most common type of ovarian cyst is called a **functional cyst**. It is a benign cyst that forms on an ovary and usually disappears on its own without treatment because it forms as a result of **ovulation**, a normal function. Each month, an egg, encased in a sac called a follicle, grows inside the ovary. The egg is released from the ovary at the middle of the menstrual cycle (see [figure](#)).

If the follicle does not open to release the egg a follicle cyst forms, and if the follicle releases the egg and closes again then a corpus luteum cyst forms. Both types of cysts usually cause no symptoms or only mild ones. They go away in 6–8 weeks.

Dermoid Cysts

Dermoid cysts may be present from birth but grow during a woman's reproductive years. These cysts may be found on one or both ovaries. Dermoid cysts form from a type of cell capable of developing into different kinds of tissue. Dermoid cysts often are small and may not cause symptoms. If they become large, they may cause pain.

Cystadenomas

Cystadenomas are cysts that develop from cells on the outer surface of the ovary. Sometimes they are filled with a liquid or a thick gel. They usually are benign, but they can grow very large and cause pain.

Endometriomas

Endometriomas are ovarian cysts that form as a result of **endometriosis** (a condition in which tissue similar to that is normally found in the uterus is found outside of the uterus, usually in the ovaries, fallopian tubes etc...).

This tissue responds to monthly changes in hormones. Eventually, a cyst may form as the endometrial tissue continues to bleed with each menstrual cycle. These cysts are sometimes called “chocolate cysts” because they are filled with dark, reddish-brown blood.

Symptoms

Most ovarian cysts are small and do not cause symptoms. Some cysts may cause a pain in the abdomen during certain activities. Larger cysts may cause twisting of the ovary that causes pain. Cysts that bleed or suddenly break open may lead to serious problems requiring prompt treatment.

In rare cases, a cyst may be cancerous. In its early stages, ovarian cancer often has no symptoms, so you should be aware of its warning signs:

- Pelvic or abdominal pain
- Back pain
- Enlargement or swelling of the abdomen
- Inability to eat normally
- Unexplained weight loss
- Urinary frequency or incontinence (Inability to control urination)
- Constipation
- Feeling tired
- Indigestion

Be sure to see your doctor if you have any of these signs. Ovarian cancer is very rare in young women, but the risk increases as a woman ages.

Diagnosis

An ovarian cyst may be found during a routine *pelvic exam* (a manual examination of a woman's reproductive organs done by the doctor.) If your health care provider finds an enlarged ovary, tests may be recommended to provide more information:

- Vaginal ultrasound—this procedure uses sound waves to create pictures of the internal organs that can be viewed on a screen. For this test, a thin instrument is placed in the vagina. The views created by the sound waves show the shape, size, location, and makeup of the cyst.
- Laparoscopy—in this type of surgery, a thin tube with a camera—is inserted into the abdomen to view the pelvic organs and to treat cysts.
- Blood tests—If you are *past menopause* (menstruation has stopped), in addition to an ultrasound exam, you may be given a test that measures the amount of a substance called CA 125 in your blood. An increased CA 125 level may be a sign of ovarian cancer. In *premenopausal* women, an increased CA 125 level can be caused by many other conditions besides cancer. For that reason, this test is not a good indicator of ovarian cancer in premenopausal women.

If your health care provider thinks that your cyst may be cancer, more tests may be ordered. It may be recommended that you see a doctor who specializes in gynecologic cancer.

Treatment

Several treatment options are available. Choosing an option depends on many factors, including the type of cyst, the symptoms, your family history, the size of the cyst, and your age.

“Watchful” Waiting

If your cyst is not causing any symptoms, your doctor may simply monitor it for 1–2 months and check to see whether it has changed in size. Most functional cysts go away on their own after one or two menstrual cycles.

Even if you are past menopause and have concerns about cancer, your health care provider may recommend regular ultrasound exams. If the appearance of your cyst changes or if it gets bigger, treatment may be needed.

Birth Control Pills

If you keep having functional cysts, birth control pills may be prescribed to prevent you from ovulating. You are much less likely to form new cysts if you do not ovulate.

This treatment will not make cysts you already have go away. But it will prevent new functional cysts from forming.

Surgery

If your cyst is large or causing symptoms, your health care provider may suggest surgery. The surgery will depend on several factors:

- Size and type of cyst
- Your age
- Your symptoms
- Your desire to have children

Sometimes, a cyst can be removed without having to remove the ovary. In other cases, one or both of the ovaries may have to be removed. Your doctor may not know which procedure is needed until after the surgery begins.

Finally...

Although most cysts are harmless and go away on their own, your health care provider will want to keep track of any cyst to be sure that it does not grow and cause problems. If you have concerns about your diagnosis or treatment, share these concerns with your health care provider.

With the compliments of the Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology

(Women’s health promotion)