

# Ovarian Cyst

---

## What is an ovarian cyst?

An ovarian cyst is a fluid-filled sac in the ovary. Many cysts are completely normal. These are called functional cysts. They occur as a result of ovulation (the release of an egg). Functional cysts normally shrink over time, usually in about 1 to 3 months. If you have a functional cyst, your doctor may want to check you again in 1 to 3 months to make sure the cyst has gotten smaller. Or your doctor may want you to take birth control pills, so you won't ovulate. If you don't ovulate, you won't form cysts.

If you are menopausal and are not having periods, you shouldn't form functional cysts. If you do have a cyst, your doctor will probably want you to have a sonogram, so he or she can look at the cyst. What your doctor decides to do after that depends on your age, the way the cyst looks on the sonogram and if you're having symptoms such as pain, bloating, feeling full after eating just a little, and constipation.

## What is a sonogram?

A sonogram uses sound waves to make "pictures" of organs in the body. It's a good way to "look" at ovaries. This kind of sonogram can be done 2 ways, either through your abdomen or vagina. Neither type is painful. The sonogram usually lasts about 30 minutes. It will give your doctor valuable information about the size and the appearance of your cyst.

## Are there any other tests I might have?

Your doctor might test your CA-125 level. This is a blood test that is often done in women with ovarian cancer. Sometimes this test is done in women with an ovarian cyst to see if their cyst could be cancerous. A normal CA-125 level is less than 35. However, this level can sometimes be high in women who do not have cancer, particularly if they are in their childbearing years.

## Do I need surgery for an ovarian cyst?

The answer depends on several things--such as your age, whether you are having periods, the size of the cyst, its appearance, and your symptoms.

If you're having periods and the cyst is simple or functional, you probably won't need to have surgery. If the cyst doesn't go away after several menstrual periods, if it gets larger, or it doesn't look like a functional cyst on the sonogram, your doctor may want you to have an operation. There are many different types of ovarian cysts in women of childbearing age that do require surgery. Fortunately, cysts in women of this age are almost always benign (not cancer).

If you're past menopause and have an ovarian cyst, your doctor will probably want you to have surgery. Ovarian cancer is rare, but women 50 to 70 years of age are at greater risk. Women who are diagnosed at an early stage do much better than women who are diagnosed later.

## What type of surgery would I need?

The type of surgery you need depends on several things such as the size of the cyst, how the cyst looks on the sonogram, and if your doctor thinks it might be cancer. If the cyst is small (about the size of a plum) and if it looks benign on the sonogram, your doctor may decide to do a laparoscopy. This type of surgery is done with a lighted instrument like a slender telescope. This is put into your abdomen through a small cut (incision) just above or just below your navel. With the laparoscope, your doctor can see your organs. Often the cyst can be removed with only small incisions in the pubic hair line. If the cyst looks too big to remove with the laparoscope or if it looks suspicious in any way, your doctor will probably do a laparotomy.

A laparotomy uses a bigger incision to remove the cyst or possibly the entire ovary. The cyst can be tested while you are under anesthesia (puts you into a sleeplike state) to find out if it is cancer. If it is cancer, your doctor may remove both ovaries, the uterus, a fatty apron called the omentum and some lymph nodes. It's very important that you talk to your doctor about all of this before the surgery. Your doctor will also talk to you about the risks with each kind of surgery, how long you are likely to be in the hospital and how long it will be before you can go back to your normal activities.

---

*This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.*

Visit [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org) for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

Copyright © 1999 by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Permission is granted to print and photocopy this material for nonprofit educational uses. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.