

## Why Aren't We Talking About Uterine Cancer?

### Shame, Stigma, and Misinformation Surrounding Women's Reproductive Health

**For too long, women's reproductive health has been wrapped in shame, silence, and stigma—and it's costing lives.** While conversations about noncommunicable diseases have gained visibility worldwide, gynecologic cancers, including uterine cancer, remain largely absent from public discourse.

**Many women don't learn about their own bodies, hormonal health, or menstrual cycles** beyond the basics needed for pregnancy prevention or fertility. When they experience changes—like irregular bleeding, extreme fatigue, or pelvic pain—many don't recognize these as warning signs of potential health issues. Instead, they're told it's "just menopause" or "normal aging."

**This silence is dangerous. Uterine cancer is the most common gynecologic cancer in high-resource countries and is rising globally, yet awareness remains alarmingly low.**



June is Uterine Cancer Awareness Month.  
Awareness Color: Peach

## Understanding Your Body: Why Hormonal Health Matters

**Knowledge is power. Women need to understand how their bodies function so they can recognize when something is wrong.**

**Postmenopausal bleeding is never normal**—if you notice any bleeding, even a small amount, consult your doctor promptly, as it could be a sign of uterine cancer.

**Your menstrual cycle is a vital sign.** Just like blood pressure and heart rate, your period is an indicator of overall health. Heavy, irregular, or postmenopausal bleeding can be a red flag for uterine cancer.

**Hormones influence more than fertility.** Estrogen and progesterone regulate not only menstruation but also metabolism, bone health, and mood. When these hormones are imbalanced—due to excess estrogen, PCOS, or obesity—it can increase the risk of uterine cancer.

**Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT)** is a treatment used to relieve symptoms of menopause, such as hot flashes, mood swings, and vaginal dryness. It's most commonly used during perimenopause (the transition phase before menopause) and post menopause. It's essential to consult with a specialist who is experienced in menopause and hormone therapy before considering hormone replacement, and make sure you follow up with your healthcare provider regularly.

**Education leads to early detection.**

Many women dismiss changes in their cycles because they were never taught what's normal versus abnormal. **We need to talk about these issues openly, without shame.** By empowering women with knowledge, we can increase early diagnoses, improve survival rates, and encourage self-advocacy in healthcare settings.

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## The Link Between Obesity, Estrogen, and Uterine Cancer

**Obesity is one of the strongest risk factors for uterine cancer. But instead of approaching this as a public health issue, society often attaches shame and blame, making it harder for women to seek help.**

### **How does obesity increase uterine cancer risk?**

Fat cells produce estrogen. When the body has excess fat, it creates extra estrogen, leading to hormonal imbalances that can stimulate the growth of uterine lining cells—sometimes abnormally. Over time, this increases the likelihood of cancer.

### **Why aren't we talking about this?**

Because obesity itself carries stigma—many people, including healthcare providers, dismiss women's concerns about weight-related health risks as a matter of "personal responsibility" rather than a complex issue influenced by genetics, environment, and access to healthcare.

### **The real solution: Support, not shame.**

Instead of blaming individuals, we must shift the conversation toward education, preventive care, and access to resources that help people make informed, sustainable health choices.

How can you support those in your life to make informed, healthy lifestyle choices?

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## The Signs and Symptoms of Uterine Cancer

### Abnormal bleeding

This is the most common symptom, especially bleeding after menopause. For premenopausal women, it may present as periods that are heavier or longer than usual and/or bleeding between periods. Other symptoms may include spotting, blood clots, and unusually colored blood or discharge.

### Pain or pressure

Pain or pressure in the pelvis, lower abdomen, back, or legs

### Pain during urination or bowel movements

Pain, difficulty urinating or having a bowel movement, or blood in urine or stool

### Unexplained weight loss

Losing weight without changing diet or exercise habits

### Abnormal Pap results

While the Pap test is not used to screen for uterine cancer, sometimes the test will show signs of abnormal cells in the lining of the uterus. For this reason, following an abnormal Pap test, a sample of endometrial tissue must be removed and examined for cancer cells.

### Other symptoms

Feeling a mass or tumor in your pelvis, fluid buildup in the abdomen or legs, lack of appetite, difficulty breathing, a foul-smelling vaginal discharge, and painful intercourse or sexual relations.

***Some of these symptoms may be the result of other, less serious conditions which can delay timely diagnosis. See a doctor right away if experiencing any of these symptoms, especially those who have gone through menopause or are at increased risk. Early detection is important. Ask for diagnostic tests to rule out cancer.***

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## Uterine Cancer Risk Reduction

The most common risk factor for endometrial cancer (the most common type of uterine cancer) is obesity. Fat tissue in the body increases estrogen levels, which can cause the lining of the uterus to grow too much. This extra growth increases the risk of tumors. Stimulating the lining of the uterus and potentially leading to abnormal cell growth that can develop into cancer.

Committing to a healthy lifestyle by eating nutritious meals, staying active, and maintaining a healthy weight can reduce the risk of developing cancer.

### Know the Risk Factors

- **Obesity:** Anyone with a uterus who is overweight or obese has a higher risk of uterine cancer.
- **Age:** Uterine cancer is more common in women over 50 years old. However, it is becoming more common in younger women.
- **Diabetes:** Women with type 2 diabetes have an increased risk.
- **Menstrual history:** Starting periods before age 12 or going through menopause after age 55 increases the risk.
- **Hormone therapy:** Taking estrogen-only hormone replacement therapy (HRT) after menopause increases the risk of uterine cancer.
- **Tamoxifen:** This drug is used to treat breast cancer, but it can increase the risk of uterine cancer because it can behave like estrogen in the uterus, stimulating the lining of the uterus and potentially leading to abnormal cell growth that can develop into cancer.
- **Endometrial hyperplasia:** Endometrial overgrowth can increase the risk.
- **Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS):** PCOS can cause higher levels of estrogen, which can increase the risk.
- **Family history:** Having a close relative with uterine or ovarian cancer increases the risk.
- **Lynch syndrome:** This rare genetic condition can increase the risk of developing cancer, especially endometrial and colorectal cancer.

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## Advocating for Yourself and Others

The taboos around gynecologic health, menstruation, obesity, and cancer are all connected. Together, they create an environment where women feel disempowered, unheard, and uneducated about their own bodies. It's time for change.

### What You Can Do:

**Talk about it.** Share information about uterine cancer and gynecologic health. The more we normalize these conversations, the less shame there is.

**Advocate for yourself.** If you feel something is off—abnormal bleeding, pain, unexplained weight changes—push for answers. Get a second opinion if necessary.

**Understand the risk factors.** Obesity (excess body weight) is the most common risk factor. Family history of endometrial or ovarian cancer and certain genetic mutations, hormonal factors, older age, diabetes, can all increase the risk of developing uterine cancer.

**Take action for your health.** Small lifestyle changes, like physical activity and balanced nutrition, can help regulate hormones and reduce cancer risks.

**Join the movement.** Support organizations that fund research, provide education, and advocate for those affected by gynecologic cancers.

**This Uterine Cancer Awareness Month, let's leap into action. Let's challenge the stigmas. And let's empower women everywhere to take charge of their health.**

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## Encouraging Developments for Uterine Cancer Care and Advocacy

### Prevention Strategies

- **Studies on diet, exercise, and metabolic health** are helping to create evidence-based guidelines for reducing uterine cancer risk.
- **Research on obesity and estrogen regulation** is leading to new prevention strategies, such as lifestyle interventions and medications that reduce excess estrogen exposure.

### Detection and Diagnosis

- **Improved genetic and biomarker testing methods** mean earlier detection and better prevention strategies.
- **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** is being used to **analyze pathology slides and scans**, improving accuracy in diagnosing and predicting cancer behavior.

### Enhanced Treatment Options

- **Advancements in immunotherapy and targeted treatments** are improving options for those with various subtypes.
- **Precision medicine tailors treatment** based on an individual's tumor biology, genetics, and immune response, making therapies more effective and less toxic.
- Studies show that **minimally invasive surgery (MIS)** can be used for early and high-risk cases. MIS can increase the patient's quality of life, resulting in less blood loss, shorter hospital stays and fewer complications.

### Advocacy, Awareness, and Outreach Efforts

- Efforts to address **racial inequities in diagnosis and treatment** are gaining traction.
- More organizations are pushing for **increased research funding** for uterine cancer.
- **Campaigns like Uterine Cancer Awareness Month** are helping to organize and mobilize communities and individuals to act and raise public awareness.

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## Precision Medicine for Uterine Cancer

### Why Staging and Classification of Uterine Cancer Matters

In 2013, The Cancer Genome Atlas identified four distinct molecular subtypes of endometrial cancer, the most common type of uterine cancer. This discovery revolutionized how we understand and treat the disease. Traditionally, endometrial cancers were classified based on how they look under a microscope, but this approach doesn't fully capture the biological diversity and genetic makeup of each tumor.

The International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) published the FIGO Staging of Endometrial Cancer in June 2023 which includes the various histological types, tumor patterns, and molecular classification to better reflect the improved understanding of the complex nature of the several types of endometrial carcinoma and their underlying biologic behavior.

#### **A More Accurate Prognosis**

By analyzing tumors at the molecular level, doctors gain deeper insights into tumor behavior, prognosis, and treatment response—leading to more precise and effective care. For example, some proteins might indicate that the cancer is more aggressive, while others might suggest it's less likely to spread.

#### **Personalized Treatment Plans: Avoiding Over- and Undertreatment**

Different molecular subtypes respond differently to therapy. Molecular classification helps doctors tailor treatment to each patient, preventing unnecessary chemotherapy (and its side effects) for those with low-risk tumors and ensuring high-risk patients get the care they need. This is precision medicine.

#### **New Hope for Targeted Therapies**

As research advances, identifying molecular subtypes opens doors to new targeted treatments, like immunotherapy. These innovations improve outcomes and reduce treatment side effects.

#### **A Step Toward Better Care**

By incorporating molecular classification into routine care, we can ensure that every patient gets the most appropriate, effective treatment. Advocacy for increased awareness and access to molecular testing is crucial to making this the standard worldwide.

**Endometrial cancer care is evolving—let's advocate for all patients to have access to the best possible diagnosis and treatment.**

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