You need an answer on vulvar cancer! [1]

Dear Alice,

I would like to ask why there is no reference to cancer of the vulva on your site. It directly affects sexual health. It's a neglected subject and it's hard to understand why everyone ignores it. This issue needs to be brought out into the open and obtain public support. Why isn't that happening on your site? Is it discrimination? You mention everything else!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Vulvar cancer is a neglected health topic, in part because it is very rare (accounting for less than 1 percent of all cancers occurring in women). Of all of the questions asked here since 1993, no one has inquired about this subject yet. Thank you for the opportunity to respond.

Education about vulvar cancer is important because early detection dramatically improves a woman's chances of survival. When vulvar cancer is detected in its early stages, before it has spread to the lymph nodes, the five-year survival rate is 90 percent. This number drops to 50 to 70 percent when the cancer has spread to the lymph nodes.

Although cancer of the vulva can include malignancies growing anywhere on the external female genitalia, vulvar cancer is most often found on the inner edges of the labia minora or majora (the inner or outer lips of the vulva, respectively) or the clitoris. In early stages, cancerous growths on the vulva can appear as pink, red, or white bumps that look similar to warts or rough patches of skin. Other signs that need to be checked by a gynecologist include:

- Growth on or near the opening of the vagina
- Rashes, warts, or sores that won't heal
- Unusual genital itching, burning, pain, bleeding, or discharge
- Color changes or irritation of the skin around the vagina that lasts longer than two weeks

The exact cause(s) of vulvar cancer is unknown, but it's more common in women who have HPV (human papillomavirus, which can cause genital warts) and/or HIV/AIDS. Older women are also at increased risk, as are those who have a history of other genital cancers, smoking, lichen sclerosis (a disorder that can cause the vulvar skin to become thin, white, crinkly, and itchy), or melanoma or unusual moles on non-vulvar skin. Hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and obesity coexist in up to 25% of vulvar cancer patients, but aren't considered independent risk factors. Women who do have risk factors for, or are worried about, vulvar cancer may want to discuss these risks with their women's health care provider. Getting an annual pelvic
exam that includes an inspection of the external genitalia for any discoloration or skin changes is also a good idea, particularly if you have had a history of abnormal pap smears.

If the presence of vulvar cancer is confirmed by a biopsy (the removal and examination of a tiny piece of affected tissue), treatment options typically include surgical removal of the affected parts, and radiation and/or chemotherapy. If large portions of the vulva need to be removed, reconstructive surgery can help to reshape the affected areas.

If you have any concern about symptoms or risk factors you may want to visit your health care provider. For more details, you can look up the Women's Cancer Network [2], an interactive website founded by the Gynecologic Cancer Foundation that offers information and support to women with vulvar and other gynecologic cancers, and to their families. It also provides a questionnaire to help evaluate and reduce risk for gynecological cancers. You can also check out the American Academy of Family Physicians [3] article on vulvar cancer for more details.

Alice!
Category:
General Health [4]
Cancer [5]

Related questions

Uterine cancer? [6]
Long term effects of genital warts for women [7]
Are we in vulva territory? [8]
Choosing a gyno: Do I want a man or woman? [9]

Published date:
May 17, 2002
Last reviewed on:
Jun 23, 2015

Footer menu

Contact Alice!
  • Content Use
  • Media Inquiries
  • Comments & Corrections
Syndication & Licensing
  • Licensing Q&As
  • Get Alice! on Your Website
  • Full Site Syndication
  • Link to Go Ask Alice!

Go Ask Alice! is not an emergency or instant response service.
If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.