The hunt for answers

Study to shed light on ovarian cancer

Little is known about what causes this deadly disease, or what can be done to help those who are diagnosed, writes Paula Goodyer.

If you’re a woman diagnosed with ovarian cancer, what can you do to improve your odds of survival? Will getting fitter make a difference, or a change of diet? Or even a prescription for the diabetes drug metformin, which, according to some research, might prolong survival?

Long-time ovarian cancer researcher Penny Webb, an associate professor at the Queensland Institute of Medical Research (QIMR), is looking for answers in a nationwide study into lifestyle factors that might improve survival and quality of life for the some 1800 women diagnosed with the disease in Australia each year.

“Women would often ring me up and say ‘Should I change my diet?’ and I realised that we don’t really know, so that’s what I’m trying to do now - find out if there’s anything that can prevent a recurrence or slow down the progress of the disease,” Webb says.

What makes the Ovarian Cancer Prognosis and Lifestyle (OPAL) study so important is that survival rates for ovarian cancer aren’t great. While about 88 per cent of women diagnosed with breast cancer survive beyond five years, the five-year survival rate for ovarian cancer is about 42 per cent.

A frustrating aspect of this disease is that its causes are elusive, making it hard to find tactics for prevention – or preventing a recurrence. What’s known so far is that the less a woman ovulates in her lifetime, the less likely she is to develop ovarian cancer. That’s why anything that puts ovulation on hold – pregnancy, breastfeeding or taking the contraceptive pill – helps lower the risk.

Use of HRT is another possible risk factor; although the evidence isn’t strong.

“Everyone believes diet is important and I think it may be – we just don’t know what aspects of it might make a difference,” Webb says.

“The strongest evidence for the influence of diet is with obesity. But one thing we’ve learnt about ovarian cancer is that it’s not one single disease – there are many different types and while obesity seems to something most of us would consider harmless: talcum powder. The theory is that when talc is dusted around the genital area, it can work its way up to the ovaries via the Fallopian tubes – while not a huge risk, it’s been a consistent finding in studies around the world, Webb says.

As for diet, some reports link a high intake of animal fat to the disease and others suggest green tea might be protective, but the evidence isn’t strong.

One family with ovarian cancer has their own unique gene mutation. The strongest evidence that physical activity may be good, although this comes from human studies are still inconclusive.

“More evidence that physical activity may be good, although this comes mostly from studies of other hormone-related cancers like prostate and breast cancer, but some research suggests that staying physically active is associated with better quality of life among women with ovarian cancer. We’re looking at what helps women cope with the side-effects of chemotherapy so that they can keep going with it, and there’s some evidence that physical activity helps,” Webb says.

If she remains cancer-free until December, Merran Williams will have joined that 42 per cent of women who survive past five years. When you ask her what’s improved her quality of life, she tells you it’s mindfulness meditation and staying fit.

“Research shows that the fear of a recurrence is on a woman’s mind all the time … I think a strategy like mindfulness meditation really helps you cope – you don’t think about the future or the past, you just think of now,” says Williams, a nurse working with Bloomhill Cancer Help, a centre for cancer survivors in Queensland.

Her advice to anyone faced with a diagnosis of ovarian cancer is to take the “weedkiller”, as she calls chemotherapy, keep up the mindfulness and walk as much as possible to build up your fitness.

“I think being physically active is important for survival,” she says. “Even if you’re nauseous from the chemo, try and keep walking around the house and garden.”

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