

Care Seeking for Gynecologic Cancer Symptoms

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Background



With limited screening options, early detection of gynecologic cancers can depend on women recognizing the potential significance of symptoms and seeking care. U.S. women's awareness of cervical and ovarian cancer symptoms has been found to be low, and little is known about their care seeking in response to symptoms that could be associated with gynecologic cancers.

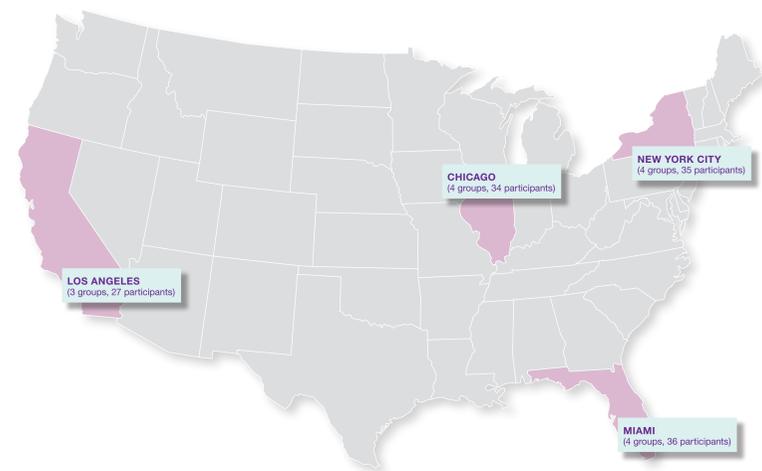
Inside Knowledge supports the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act of 2005, or Johanna's Law, passed unanimously by Congress in 2006, and signed into law in January 2007.

Objective

We investigated how women respond to symptoms which could indicate gynecologic cancers.

Methods

Fifteen focus groups with 132 women aged 40-60 years were conducted in 4 U.S. cities: Miami, New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles.



Participants were given an untitled list of symptoms and asked if any would concern them; what might cause each; if they had ever experienced them, what did they do; and how they would respond to symptoms if they occurred in the future.

List Given to Participants

The focus group moderator did not use the term "symptoms" during the discussion. To mitigate any order effects, the sequence in which symptoms were listed was rotated midway through the study. The symptoms listed were drawn from CDC's *Inside Knowledge* campaign materials (www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge).

- Bleeding or discharge from your vagina that is not normal for you
- Changes in the color of the skin of the vulva or a rash, sores, or warts on the vulva
- Itching or burning in the genital area that does not go away
- Pain or pressure in the pelvic area (the area below your stomach and between your hip bones)
- Back or abdominal pain
- Being tired all the time
- A change in your bathroom habits, such as having to pass urine very badly or very often
- Bloating, which is when the area below your stomach swells or feels full

Results

Actual and predicted responses to symptoms reported by women included waiting for an extended period before seeking care or not seeking care at all. Few women were aware that the symptoms described could be associated with gynecologic cancers. The exception to that was unusual vaginal bleeding, which several focus group participants said could be related to cervical cancer. Concern that a symptom might signal a serious condition, a personal tendency to seek care promptly, and pain associated with the symptom were the most common reasons given for timely care seeking. Strategies that participants reported using to supplement or replace consultation with health care providers included Internet research and self-care.

Selected Quotations

Topic	Quotation
Delayed care seeking in response to symptom	"I had back pain for years. Finally I did something about it...But it was for years."
Failure to seek care in response to symptom	"Well, I've had the [unusual vaginal] bleeding...I guess, because I don't like doctors, I didn't go...I waited and waited till it finally went away. So I'm like, 'Okay, I'm cool.' Right?"
Lack of awareness that symptoms could indicate gynecologic cancers	"I didn't know any of these [listed symptoms] had to do with cancer. I don't really know anything about this type of cancer."
Care seeking prompted by concern that symptoms could indicate gynecologic cancers	"If I had [unusual vaginal] bleeding, if I had itching or burning [in the genital area that does not go away], if I had to go to the bathroom a lot, I'd call my gynecologist. To me, these are all the symptoms of ovarian cancer."

Conclusions

Our results illustrate the need to educate women about gynecologic cancers, their signs, symptoms, and risk factors. To minimize undue anxiety among women, care must be taken to explain that symptoms can suggest many benign conditions. However, in the case of post-menopausal vaginal bleeding, providers should counsel their patients that immediate care is warranted.

Ultimately, significant decreases in gynecologic cancer morbidity and mortality may depend on the development and uptake of population-based prevention and screening modalities and improved treatments. Until then, increasing public awareness offers a potential pathway to earlier diagnosis of some gynecologic cancers.

