The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Ovarian Cancer

It is currently Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month.

Today, we look at the impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on those suffering with ovarian cancer, as well as the wider impact it has had on cancer research.

Coronavirus has had a devastating impact across the globe for a year (and counting), especially for ovarian cancer sufferers.

The lockdowns in the UK as a result of the pandemic have affected the health and wellbeing of ovarian cancer patients, and have resulted in increased delays in diagnosis and treatment.

Effect on diagnosis and treatment

Getting timely treatment for ovarian cancer is very important. If ovarian cancer is diagnosed at stage 1, a woman has a 90% chance of surviving for five years or more. However, only 33% of women are diagnosed at this stage, and the pandemic has led to even further delays in diagnosis.

Ovarian cancer is diagnosed via a blood test. If the blood test shows high levels of CA125 (an early sign of ovarian cancer), a woman will then be referred for an ultrasound scan. Before the pandemic, there were already delays in diagnosis, with the average waiting time from referral to ultrasound being 31 days. It is now becoming apparent that the pandemic has only worsened this.

Furthermore, many women are worried about visiting their doctors, even if they are showing symptoms, or are worried about going to the hospital for consultations or treatments due to fears over contracting coronavirus.

According to a study by the organisation Target Ovarian Cancer, the pandemic has also had a significant impact on the treatment of ovarian cancer, with 54% of women with ovarian cancer reporting that their treatment has been affected by coronavirus. Some women have had a delay in their treatment whilst additional safety measures have been put in place, or have had their treatment delivered in a different way, such as having consultations by video or telephone rather than in person.

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The surgery to treat ovarian cancer can be complex. The results of the study indicated that many women have reported that their surgery has been postponed and have instead been given additional cycles of chemotherapy whilst waiting for this delayed surgery. However, some chemotherapy has been affected with cycles being made shorter or being postponed or cancelled. This is primarily due to resources being prioritised for treatment of coronavirus patients.

Ovarian cancer research has also been affected by the pandemic. Many cancer treatment trials have been paused during the pandemic, thus impacting the research being undertaken.

On 16 March 2021, a group of cancer charities announced that without urgent action, the UK's cancer death rate will rise for the first time in decades and that there will be a backlog of cancer patients. 'One Cancer Voice' estimates that millions of people have had their cancer care affected in some way by the pandemic. Their research suggests that at least 43,700 fewer people got treatment for cancer from April 2020, compared to the equivalent period before the pandemic. 'One Cancer Voice' have called for more investment in resources to ensure that such backlog is reduced and eliminated.

Effect on the lives of ovarian cancer patients

Coronavirus is a viral infection that mainly affects the lungs. Anyone who has a weakened immune system is more at risk of becoming seriously ill should they contract coronavirus, as their ability to fight infections is reduced. Many types of cancer and cancer treatments, including chemotherapy and some radiotherapy, will affect the immune system. Therefore, ovarian cancer patients that are going through chemotherapy will have a weakened immune system and will be at risk of becoming seriously ill should they contract coronavirus, meaning that the majority would be considered clinically extremely vulnerable.

Those that are considered clinically extremely vulnerable were asked to shield by the NHS at the beginning of the pandemic. They have also been asked to shield in subsequent lockdowns where there has been an increase in cases. Research by the organisation Target Ovarian Cancer found that 79% of women with ovarian cancer were advised to shield.

Shielding will have drastically affected the lives of ovarian cancer sufferers at what is already a very worrying and isolating time. Many cancer sufferers rely on the support of their family and friends which has not been as easy during lockdowns with face-to-face contact being limited. This will have led to increased feelings of loneliness and vulnerability. Even for those ovarian cancer sufferers that have finished treatment, they will still have a weaker immune system and even if they are not shielding, their lives will have still been impacted by the lockdown and social distancing restrictions.

Charities such as Cancer Research and Macmillan Cancer support have issued updated guidance for cancer suffers throughout during the pandemic.

Going through any sort of cancer is an incredibly stressful and worrying time, but these added life changes and

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delays or cancellations of treatment as a result of the pandemic have made this an even harder experience for patients.

For more information on the research into the impact of the coronavirus on ovarian cancer, please see:

Sources for writing this article:

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