What Is Uterine Cancer (Uterine Sarcoma)?

Cancer is caused by malignant (cancerous) cells that grow and multiply without control. When cancer begins in the muscle or supporting tissues of the uterus (womb), it is called uterine cancer, or uterine sarcoma.

The uterus is a hollow, pear-shaped organ located in a woman's lower abdomen (belly), between the bladder and rectum. In addition to uterine sarcoma, forms of cancer affecting the uterus include endometrial cancer (link to page) (begins in the tissues lining the uterus) and cervical cancer (link to page) (begins in the narrow, lower part of the uterus).

Types of uterine sarcoma include:
- Leiomyosarcoma: Begins in smooth muscle cells
- Endometrial stromal sarcoma: Begins in connective tissue cells
- Adenosarcomas: unknown
- Mixed mullerian tumors (carcinosarcoma): Begins in cells in the endometrial glands

Uterine sarcoma is rare. The American Cancer Society (ACS) estimated that about 1,600 new cases of uterine sarcoma would be diagnosed in the United States in 2015.

Please note: The information on this page refers specifically to uterine sarcoma.

Uterine Cancer Symptoms

The symptoms of uterine cancer may look like those associated with other medical conditions. Talk to your doctor if you notice any:
- Unusual vaginal bleeding, spotting or discharge
- Vaginal bleeding after menopause
- Frequent, difficult or painful urination
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Pain in the pelvic area

Uterine cancer is most likely to occur around the time menopause begins. The occasional reappearance of bleeding should not be considered simply part of menopause and should always be checked by a doctor.

Diagnosing Uterine Cancer

The first step in diagnosing any disease is to complete a medical history and physical examination. In order to diagnose uterine sarcoma, your doctor may also order tests and procedures including:
- **Internal pelvic examination:** The doctor examines the uterus, vagina, ovaries, bladder and rectum
- **Transvaginal ultrasound (ultrasonography):** A small probe called an ultrasound traducer is placed in the vagina. The device makes high-frequency sound waves to create images of the body tissues and identify tumors (abnormal growths)
- **Biopsy:** During this procedure, which is often done in a doctor's office, a sample of uterine tissue is collected by inserting a small, flexible tube into the uterus. A pathologist then views the sample under a microscope to check for cancer

When cancer cells are found, other tests are used to see if the disease has spread from the uterus to other parts of the body. These procedures may include:
- Blood tests
- Chest X-rays
- Computed tomography (CT) scans
- Ultrasound to view organs inside the body
- Special exams of the bladder, colon and rectum

Treating Uterine Cancer
If you are diagnosed with uterine sarcoma, your care team will work with you to develop a treatment plan. This individualized plan will depend on factors such as type and stage (extent) of uterine cancer, your general health, and your treatment preferences.

Surgery is the most common treatment option for uterine cancer. Types of surgery include:

- **Hysterectomy**: Removal of the uterus, including the cervix. Cutting-edge approaches to this procedure include:
  - Robotic-assisted hysterectomy
  - Laparoscopic hysterectomy (in which a narrow viewing tube is inserted through a small incision in the belly to remove the uterus)

- **Radical hysterectomy**: Removal of the uterus, including the cervix, and part of the vagina

Some women who have had surgery for uterine cancer may need more types of treatment. Other treatment options include:

- **Radiation therapy** uses high-energy radiation beams to kill or shrink tumors while sparing healthy tissue. The radiation source can come from outside the body (external radiation therapy) or from implants inside the body (internal radiation therapy)

- **Chemotherapy** kills cancer cells through the use of intravenous (IV) or oral drugs

- **Hormone therapy** blocks the action of or stops the body from producing certain hormones that can cause cancer cells to grow

Some hospitals also offer clinical trials that may provide access to new and promising therapies for uterine cancer.