

But I'm Too Young!

A Case Study of Ovarian Cancer

by

Nancy Rice, Department of Biology, Western Kentucky University
Bruno Borsari, Biology Department, Winona State University

Abby was in her Introductory Biology class that morning, listening to a speaker talk about human evolution. Although she was particularly interested in this topic because it related to the anthropology class she was currently in, she was unable to pay attention because of the pain in her abdomen. She had been experiencing it for a few weeks, but now it was becoming unbearable. She began to sweat.

“What’s the matter?” whispered her roommate Kelly, who was sitting next to her. “Are you all right?”

“My stomach hurts! I don’t think I can make it to the end of class. I really think I need to see a doctor.”

The tears running down Abby’s cheeks told Kelly that she was not joking. Kelly grabbed Abby’s book bag and helped her friend get up. They went straight to the campus health center.

“Well, the fact that you don’t have any fever and that your pain doesn’t appear to be coming from your appendix is good,” comforted the physician at the health center after checking Abby’s abdomen.

“I’m going to give you some medicine to relieve the pain for right now, but tomorrow I want you to come in to see Dr. Allen, our gynecologist. I would like her to run a few more tests in order to figure out where your pain is coming from.”

The next day Abby went to see Dr. Allen. During the examination, Dr. Allen felt a mass on Abby’s right ovary while pressing on her abdomen. Dr. Allen ordered a sonogram.

“Abby, the sonogram shows that you have a growth on your right ovary,” Dr. Allen said. “It is likely a cyst, but we’ll need to do some more testing to be sure. Many times a cyst will resolve on its own, but since this one is so large, I am going to recommend that we go ahead and have it surgically removed, along with your right ovary. This should help relieve the pain. Your remaining ovary will compensate for the one missing by ovulating every month. I would also like to run a blood test to look for signs of ovarian cancer. While rare at your age, increases in a protein called CA-125, a marker of cancer, will be able to help us determine if we are dealing with a cyst or cancer.”

Abby was scared. What did all this information mean? She felt overwhelmed, and when she returned to her dorm she broke down in tears. That night, unable to sleep, Abby and Kelly glued themselves to their laptop computers. They were searching the Internet for answers to Abby’s questions.