UK Collaborative Trial of Ovarian Cancer Screening (UKCTOCS)
Question & Answer

Did screening save lives in UKCTOCS?

In UKCTOCS two methods of screening were tested, one based on a blood test for CA125 (called multimodal strategy) and a second, ultrasound strategy where women had an internal scan every year. It was found that the screening using the multimodal strategy may reduce the number of deaths due to ovarian cancer by 20% but follow up is needed to establish more concrete estimates of how many deaths from ovarian cancer could be prevented by screening.

How many lives were saved?

The early results suggested that approximately 15 ovarian cancer deaths could be prevented for every 10,000 women who attend a screening programme that involves annual blood tests for at least seven to 11 years.

Do the results mean that there will be a national screening programme for women aged 50 and over?

No, the current report is not sufficient for the decision to be made regarding setting up a national screening programme for ovarian cancer. Researchers need to follow-up the trial participants for 3 years more before the full impact of screening on reducing deaths from ovarian cancer is known.

Other factors such as the risk to benefit ratio and the cost effectiveness of ovarian cancer screening also need to be considered before any decisions about the future of a national screening service can be reached.

In addition, the study found that for every ovarian cancer case detected by the screening, 2 additional women in the multimodal group and 10 in the ultrasound group had unnecessary surgery where the ovaries had benign lesions or were normal. Around 3% of the latter women who had surgery had a major complication. These, and other, harms would need to be fully considered in any decision making.

If there is no screening programme, what are the alternatives?

There are no changes to existing guidelines which state that screening should not be undertaken in low risk women with no symptoms. Women should be aware of the symptoms of ovarian cancer and seek medical advice if they have any concerns.

The symptoms include abdominal or pelvic pain, persistent bloating, difficulty eating and feeling full quickly, and urinary frequency. If women have any of these symptoms persistently or frequently, especially if they are over 50, they need to see their GP.
Are there any alternative tests being developed for ovarian cancer?

There is research underway to develop more sensitive tests for ovarian cancer and this includes new tests that can complement CA125 or detect cancer earlier than CA125 rises. Molecular imaging techniques are also being investigated to pick up very small tumours. Some groups are working on developing tests using vaginal swabs to pick up ovarian cancer.

Are these results applicable for women at higher risk of developing ovarian cancer?

No, these results are for women who are from the general population without any significant family history of ovarian or breast cancer in their family. A separate study coordinated by the Gynaecological Cancer Research Centre at UCL focused on screening in women with a family history of ovarian/breast cancers. This study, United Kingdom Familial Ovarian Cancer Screening Study (UKFOCSS) is also complete and the data is being analysed. Results from UKFOCSS are due to be reported in the near future. Please see the study website for more details http://www.instituteforwomenshealth.ucl.ac.uk/womens-cancer/gcrc/ukfocss

What is your advice to women concerned today about their health?

If any of the above symptoms occur on most days and this is not normal for them, it is important for the women to see their GP. It’s unlikely that these symptoms are caused by a serious problem, but it’s important to be checked. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) issued guidance in 2011 for the initial recognition and management of ovarian cancer (http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG122/InformationForPublic) in England and Wales.

What is being done to improve awareness of ovarian cancer? Where can I find out more?

Early diagnosis of cancer may improve survival from cancer and is therefore a very high priority for healthcare agencies. There are a number of initiatives to help improve the public's awareness of the symptoms of ovarian cancer, and GPs awareness of the importance of early diagnosis, by the government and by charities that are dedicated to cancer such as Cancer Research UK: www.cancerresearchuk.org, Macmillan Cancer Support: www.macmillan.org or those focused specifically on ovarian cancer such as The Eve Appeal: www.eveappeal.org.uk, Ovacome: www.ovacome.org.uk, Ovarian Cancer Action: www.ovarian.org.uk, and Target Ovarian Cancer: www.targetovariancancer.org.uk.

Do you believe that one day it will be possible to screen for ovarian cancer?

Today’s results are a step in the right direction but further data is needed to confirm that ovarian cancer screening saves lives, and that screening is cost effective, before a national screening programme can be delivered. If this happens it is likely to take several years.