

# Thousands dying from ovarian cancer as GPs spot symptoms too late

By **Kate Pickles** Health Reporter

THOUSANDS of women in the UK are dying from ovarian cancer because GPs are failing to spot early signs of the disease, a report suggests.

Britain is lagging behind Europe and the United States with less than a third of sufferers – 30 per cent – diagnosed within a month of seeing a doctor, compared to an average of 43 per cent around the world.

Yet women here are the most likely to go to their doctor to discuss their symptoms, suggesting avoidable delays in diagnosis and treatment.

Survival rates for ovarian cancer improve drastically if it is detected early but the study found two thirds – 66 per cent – of women in this country are only diagnosed once the cancer has spread.

Last night, charities branded the delays unacceptable and called for more training for health professionals to spot signs of the disease, such as frequent bloat-

ing, abdominal and pelvic pain and feeling full quickly.

The World Ovarian Cancer Coalition compiled data from the experiences of more than 1,500 women with ovarian cancer from 44 countries, in the largest ever global review of the disease.

It found widespread variations in how the cancer was diagnosed

and then treated within health systems around the world.

The UK has almost universal access to specialists but the lowest proportion of women were diagnosed within a month of visiting a doctor – just 30 per cent. In Italy the rate was more than double that, at 62.3 per cent.

In Japan, 56.3 per cent of

women were diagnosed inside 30 days, but that figure drops to 33.8 per cent in Canada.

Women with the most common type of ovarian cancer were least likely to be diagnosed at stage I in the UK. Just 3.1 per cent of cases were caught early here compared to an overall average of 9.4 per cent.

Patients in Germany had the shortest time to diagnosis, but had less access to specialist clinicians that are key to successful treatment. Women in the US were most likely to wait more than three months before consulting a doctor

## 'Women cannot wait any longer'

about symptoms, but more likely to receive genetic testing, researchers found.

Ovarian cancer is the sixth most common cancer for women in the UK, with around 7,300 new cases each year. Experts predict this will rise to around 10,500 cases annually by 2035, because of the growing ageing population.

Symptoms of the disease include abdominal and pelvic pain, needing to urinate more frequently, and unexplained weight loss.

Yet research has shown that two-thirds of women had never heard of ovarian cancer or did not know any-

thing about it before their diagnosis. Research by charity Target Ovarian Cancer showed nearly half (46 per cent) of women with the disease are initially referred for tests for something other than ovarian cancer. This means they risk delays while waiting for results.

Annwen Jones, chief executive of Target Ovarian Cancer, wants to raise awareness among GPs and women to help boost earlier diagnosis rates.

She said: 'Going to a GP sooner should mean a faster diagnosis of ovarian cancer, and yet we are still seeing unacceptable delays.'

'Women cannot wait any longer – we need to empower GPs by improving their knowledge of ovarian cancer and the symptoms, and give them better access to diagnostic tests and a faster pathway to help them diagnose ovarian cancer more quickly.'

Studies suggest 10,000 deaths could be prevented each year if the UK merely hit the European average for five-year survival of all cancers.

But experts say GPs will have to send many more patients for tests – and at a much earlier stage – if this is to happen.

Target Ovarian Cancer is calling on the Government fund a campaign to increase knowledge of its symptoms and expand its one stop shops for rapid cancer diagnosis.