Breaking the Silence on Ovarian Cancer
By: Dr. Borislava Burt-Libo

September is designated Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month to help increase awareness and spread education about this life-threatening gynecologic cancer.

Ovarian cancer is the second most common gynecologic malignancy in the United States, with survival rates that depend on the staging at the time of diagnosis. Once called the silent killer, ovarian cancer originates in the ovaries and often goes undetected until it has spread within the pelvis and abdomen.

More than 22,000 new cases of ovarian cancer diagnosed in the U.S. each year, with approximately 14,000 deaths. Most commonly, ovarian cancer is diagnosed in its late stages due to the vagueness of the symptoms associated with it. When diagnosed at this late stage, it is more difficult to treat and is frequently fatal. Early-stage ovarian cancer, in which the disease is still confined to the ovary, is more likely to be treated successfully, which is why it is important for women and the healthcare community to gain awareness about this serious disease.

The five-year survival rate for early-stage treatment is over 90 percent. Surgery and chemotherapy are generally used to treat ovarian cancer. Since there is no early detection test for ovarian cancer and the symptoms especially in the beginning of the disease are so nonspecific – getting an evaluation, be it by a primary care physician or a gynecologist at the onset of symptoms is important, as well as being aware of one’s risk factors.

Risk factors are hereditary, increasing age, early onset of menstruation, late onset of menopause, a woman’s reproductive history and whether or not she breastfed; use of certain medications for infertility treatments, endometriosis, and women with polycystic ovarian syndrome. Some environmental factors play a role – cigarette smoking, talc powder, and asbestos. Obesity and use of menopausal hormone therapy can also increase a woman’s risk.

Most symptoms are vague and nonspecific – however, they can be present even in early stages of ovarian cancer. Symptoms may include bloating, pelvic pain, indigestion, and a frequent need to urinate. Other symptoms may include extreme fatigue, heartburn or upset stomach, lower back and/or leg pain, change in bowel habits (constipation or diarrhea), weight gain or weight loss, menstrual irregularities, shortness of breath, and/or pain during intercourse.

Due to the fact that these symptoms may not always be linked to a gynecologic condition, women should see their physician if such symptoms persist. The key is to listen to your body and follow through with a physician evaluation.

Borislava Burt-Libo, D.O., has joined the staff of the Bay Obstetrics and Gynecology practice, affiliated with Raritan Bay Medical Center. The Bay physicians are all board certified and provide comprehensive healthcare for women of all ages. Office locations include 740 Route 1 North, Iselin, NJ, and 2045 Highway 35 South, South Amboy, NJ. To schedule an appointment, call 732-316-4951.