

The Fight Continues to End Ovarian Cancer

Dr. Alhilli is an excellent example of the talented and persistent community in Northeast Ohio in the fight to end ovarian cancer.

By Bridget Cook

In the U.S. healthcare system, much has changed during the last two years as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Patients and providers have found new ways to work together and bypass the challenges of the pandemic—meeting for virtual appointments, changing treatment plans, and taking extra care in the case of immunocompromised patients.

One physician who has witnessed those changes take place and taken steps to adapt and change along with them is Dr. Mariam Alhilli, who has been a staff physician in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Cleveland Clinic since 2015. During a June 2022 interview, Dr. Alhilli shared more about the current landscape for ovarian cancer treatment, how telehealth has transformed patient access, and research innovations she's currently involved in. Dr. Alhilli specializes in the surgical management of women with gynecologic cancers including ovarian cancer, endometrial cancer, cervical cancer, and vulvar cancer.

Critical work such as Dr. Alhilli's is supported by funds raised through OutRun Ovarian Cancer (OROC), an annual 5k run/walk and family fun run dedicated to finding treatments and cures for ovarian cancer. The event is scheduled to take place in downtown Cleveland on August 6, 2022 with in-person and virtual options available.

Ovarian cancer has historically been difficult to detect in early stages, partially due to its vague symptoms. By the time patients are screened for ovarian cancer, they may have visited a number of specialists, thinking gastrointestinal issues were the culprit. "Patients may either disregard their symptoms or see their primary care or GI doctor and may present at the hospital with increased abdominal pain or bleeding," explained Dr. Alhilli. "The diagnosis may not be made until the emergency room."

While symptoms can be difficult to detect for ovarian cancer, there are signs to look out for and report if they persist. "I think knowing your body and listening to your body, any signs that things may not be well, is worth paying attention to," said Dr. Alhilli. "Due to stress from the pandemic or other events going on, people may ignore these symptoms or just attribute them to stress." According to the CDC, symptoms for ovarian cancer include post-menopausal bleeding, pressure in the pelvic area, bloating, abdominal or back pain, feeling too full as well as difficulty eating.

In her research, Dr. Alhilli has explored the impact of dietary changes as part of cancer treatment. "What I am most excited about and interested in is the question, 'how can we prevent ovarian cancer on a holistic level?'" said Dr. Alhilli. Treatment options for patients can also be impacted positively by dietary adjustments. "Often times, our patients come in asking and wanting advice about what dietary changes they can make; it's something that's within their control. It's very important for us to figure out and understand what the best core nutrition plan is for each patient. There are a lot of changes within the tumor in terms of how it can be affected by diet and nutrition. So



that's an area I'm very excited about and I think is very promising."

Dr. Alhilli is an excellent example of the talented and persistent community in Northeast Ohio in the fight to end ovarian cancer. Since 2003, OROC has raised more than \$2,000,000 towards innovative research. A unique and supportive community of survivors, caregivers and patients brought together through the organization has proven to be a beacon of hope for many. To learn more about the work OROC has supported and its commitment to early detection, education and empowerment, visit their website www.oroc.org.

September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month!



Ovarian Cancer Symptoms

Ovarian cancer usually presents with a constellation of symptoms including:

- Abdominal pressure, bloating or discomfort, feeling "full"
- Constipation, diarrhea/changes in bowel function
- Frequent urination/changes in bladder patterns
- Nausea, indigestion and/or gas
- Abnormal bleeding
- Shortness of breath
- Unusual fatigue/backaches
- Unexpected weight gain, increased abdominal circumference
- Unexpected weight loss

Symptoms may be experienced by women at some point in their lives, and usually do not indicate ovarian cancer. However, if symptoms persist for three weeks or more with no diagnosable cause, contact your doctor and ask about ovarian cancer.

www.ROC.org