

# ovarian cancer

## Climbing new heights to fight a not-so-silent killer

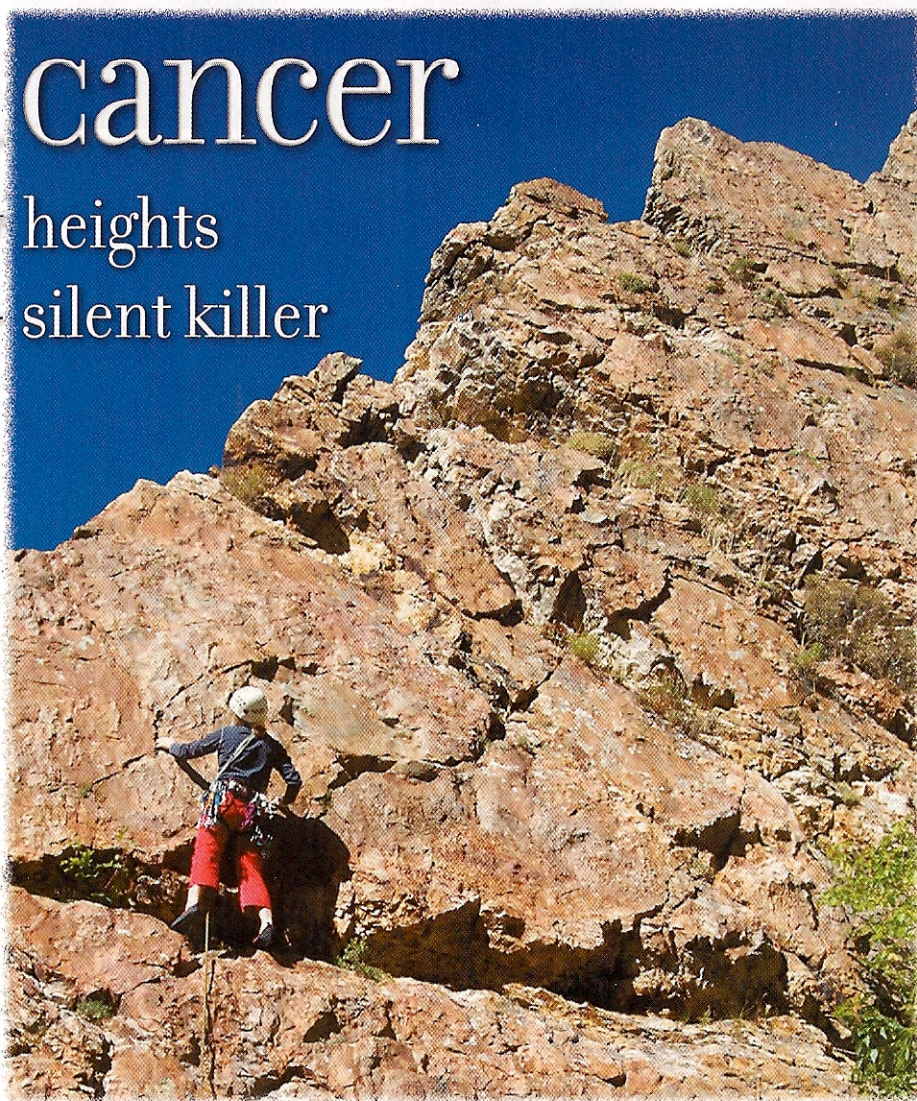
BY STEPHANIE FORTE

Growing up a part of generation X, I felt empowered by knowledge and liberated by modern science. I had my annual gynecological check-ups, performed self-breast exams, read the latest articles on women's health, and embraced the girl power of racing for the cure every spring. What a shock to discover that I knew so little.

Three years ago an old friend from Colorado, Sean Patrick, told me about her ongoing battle with ovarian cancer. She fought doctors who didn't take her seriously when she insisted she was sick – they suggested the avid mountain biker, rock climber, skier and successful business woman should get a hobby or swallow some valium. Finally diagnosed with ovarian cancer stage IIIc, she underwent seven grueling surgeries only to be told she had up to six weeks to live (that was three years ago, so doctors can be mistaken).

Quietly I exhaled a sigh of relief, whew – it's a good thing I had my annual exams. As if on cue, Patrick then stated a fact that sent a jolt up my spine: annual pap smears do not test for ovarian cancer, yet, nearly 60 percent of women believe they do. And as the conversation progressed, the numbers began to loom:

- More than 25,500 women will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2004
- 16,090 will die, according to the American Cancer Society
- Ovarian cancer occurs in 1 in 57 women, up from 1 in 70 just a few years ago
- It is the fourth leading cause of cancer death among women and kills more women than all other gynecological cancers combined



*HERA Climb for Life Las Vegas 2003*

- 90 percent of women who have ovarian cancer have no family history of it

There is no strength to be found in these numbers. After that phone call, I understood why she had started a non-profit organization to raise awareness of ovarian cancer and funding for more progressive research: the HERA (Health, Empowerment, Research and Advocacy) Foundation. But my head was spinning; I didn't want to belong to an exclusive club with too few members – ovarian cancer survivors.

### AWARENESS OF SYMPTOMS

For years ovarian cancer has been dubbed the silent killer. Seventy-six percent of its victims are diagnosed in the later stages of the disease, when the chance of a five-year survival

drops to less than 25 percent. If ovarian cancer is diagnosed in its early stages, before it has spread outside the ovaries, the chance of a five-year survival rises to over 90 percent. While that's a hopeful statistic, another must be changed: only 24 percent of women are diagnosed early. The first step is raising awareness.

The pink ribbons are a success. Plastered on everything from yogurt to running shoes, they've helped breast cancer awareness go through the roof. Women are more educated and they're getting mammograms – this helps to save lives. To say that ovarian cancer is a silent killer is like expecting us to believe that if we fail to send an e-mail to 20 of our closest friends, we'll have eternal bad luck. It's a myth.

Many women have experienced the symptoms of ovarian cancer:

- Bloating, feeling full, gas



# HERA Ovarian Cancer Climb for Life Las Vegas

FEBRUARY 5, 2005

Women, men and kids of all ages and ability levels are invited to learn to climb, win great prizes, meet world famous professional climbers, get a free massage and help raise funds and awareness for ovarian cancer, an under-recognized threat to women's health. A portion of the proceeds will help the Ovarian Cancer Alliance of Nevada (OCAN) fund programs in Las Vegas. For more information, visit [ovariancancer.jhmi.edu/climb](http://ovariancancer.jhmi.edu/climb) or call 702. 898. 2547.

Hosted by: The HERA Foundation,  
PowerHouse Climbing Center & Desert Rock Sports

## ARE YOU AT RISK?

Women with the greatest risk for ovarian cancer should insist on being regularly monitored as young as age 30. These are women who:

- Have two or more relatives who have been diagnosed with ovarian cancer
- Have a family history of multiple cancers: ovarian, breast or colon
- Have been diagnosed with breast cancer under the age of 50
- Have a personal history of multiple exposures to fertility drugs
- Are of Ashkenazi Jewish decent
- Have the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation
- Are over the age of 50



Dr. Brant Wang

- Frequent or urgent urination
- Nausea, indigestion, constipation, diarrhea
- Menstrual disorders
- Pain during intercourse
- On-going fatigue and backaches
- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Leg pain
- Pelvic or abdominal cramping, swelling or pain
- Persistent gastrointestinal problems

But according to Patrick, and many other survivors, what makes ovarian cancer symptoms different, is they persist and worsen over time. "I knew something was wrong with my body," says Patrick. "When you experience these symptoms, they're much more intense and persistent than a backache from a bad night's sleep. You know something isn't right."

A study conducted at the University of Washington's Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology included 1,725 ovarian cancer patients in 46 states and four Canadian provinces. The results found that 95 percent of the women (70 percent of whom were diagnosed at Stage III/IV) reported symptoms as follows: abdominal 77 percent, gastrointestinal 70 percent, pain 58 percent, urinary 34 percent and pelvic 26 percent. A mere 11 percent diagnosed in Stage I/II and 3 percent with Stage III/IV said they experienced no symptoms.

According to the study, the top reasons women weren't diagnosed early includes: (1) the women themselves dismissed the symptoms; (2) they did not

receive proper tests or exams; and (3) they were told by their doctors they were simply stressed out or depressed; others were diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome. Twenty-six percent of the women reported that it took more than six months for their healthcare provider to make their diagnosis – with ovarian cancer, time is of the essence.

## GET SMART

Traditionally ovarian cancer has been ruled out last in the testing process, but insist your doctor rule it out first. Though screening tests for early detection of ovarian cancer are not as reliable as the Pap smear is for cervical cancer, you can ask for the following tests to rule out the possibility.

The experts recommend:

- Bimanual pelvic exam
- CA 125 blood test (New studies indicate that CA 125 measured serially increases its accuracy as a screening tool.)
- Transvaginal ultrasound
- If ovarian cancer is suspected, ask to see a gynecological oncologist

Several new tests for early detection are on the horizon. By supporting organizations such as the HERA Foundation, which donates over 90 percent of the funds they raise to awareness programs and funding research, you can help make a difference. Each year HERA awards its OSBI (Outside the Box) Grant to young scientists who are conducting progressive research, such as Brant Wang, M.D., Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins.

For more information or to become part of a local ovarian cancer support group, contact the Ovarian Cancer Alliance of Nevada (OCAN) at (702) 796-0430 or [www.ocan.org](http://www.ocan.org). Or, visit the Johns Hopkins ovarian cancer Web site at [www.ovariancancer.jhmi.edu](http://www.ovariancancer.jhmi.edu). While there, check out HERA Foundation's Climb for Life and join the Climb for Life event Saturday, Feb. 5, 2005 at the PowerHouse Climbing Center in Las Vegas. A portion of the proceeds will benefit OCAN to help fund wellness programs for women battling cancer in Las Vegas. **EW**