

Joan Oswald is one of
many women living
longer—and better—with

OVARIAN CANCER

Discover how this is possible BY HOLLY FORD

Sixty-year-old Joan Oswald works part time as a nurse. She goes to the gym regularly, loves to travel and is active in the lives of her six grandchildren. Although her days are busy and her weeks full, there's now something new at the top of her to-do list: managing cancer.

Oswald was initially diagnosed with stage 3 ovarian cancer in 2014. "I had just had a physical two months prior and got a clean bill of health, so this diagnosis was a complete shock," she says. Her mother died from the disease at age 67, so Oswald had always been proactive when it came to her health, receiving regular gynecologic screenings and annual checkups.





Joan Oswald is one of many women who are now living longer with ovarian cancer, thanks to recent treatment advances. "Now that we have more options beyond chemotherapy to fight it, women can live with this disease with a good quality of life. Ideally, we'd like to cure this disease."

—Linda Duska, MD, Gynecologic Oncologist, UVA Cancer Center

Like many diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Oswald recalls no early signs or symptoms. When she began experiencing abdominal bloating, the cancer had already spread into her pelvis.

"Ovarian cancer has been known in the past as the 'silent killer,'" says Linda Duska, MD, a gynecologic oncologist at University of Virginia Cancer Center. Unlike breast, cervical or colon cancer, there isn't a screening test for ovarian cancer. Recent data show that many women have symptoms in the months before the diagnosis is made, but these problems are common—bloating, constipation, frequent urination—and so they are frequently overlooked, especially among postmenopausal women, who are at an increased risk for the disease.

"Approximately 75 percent of ovarian cancers are diagnosed at stage 3 or 4, when they are more difficult to treat," Duska explains. "With good surgery and the right chemotherapy, approximately 80 percent of those patients will go into remission; however, most will experience a recurrence."

Changing the Odds

One reason this cancer returns is chemotherapy resistance, when cancer cells stop responding to a drug that was once preventing their growth. "There is a lot of research currently on how to combat and prevent chemotherapy resistance," Duska says. Many oncologists are now looking at alternatives to traditional chemotherapy, including immunotherapy (activating the body's own immune system to attack cancer cells), delivering chemotherapy directly to the site of the cancer rather than via the bloodstream, and drugs designed to target the genetic mutations of specific cancers.

"This is the road we're going down with cancer treatment overall," Duska says. "Because these approaches are more cancer-specific, theoretically they will have fewer 'broad side effects' like nerve damage and hair loss, so they're less taxing on the patient."

Being treated at a center that specializes in gynecologic cancers helps ensure that ovarian cancer patients have access to the latest treatment options (see "Exploring All Options" and, importantly, the most appropriate surgical treatment done by a gynecologic oncologist. UVA is one of those centers. "There are four specially trained gynecologic oncologists at UVA," Duska says. "We are all researchers, so we have our finger on the pulse of what's going on in this field."

For Oswald, Duska recommended extensive surgery to remove all of the tumors, followed by a three-month chemotherapy regimen made available to her through a clinical trial. "It was the right combination for me," Oswald says. "I handled the treatment very well. The pain from surgery was managed appropriately, and I was never sick." The best part: Oswald went into remission.

Less than a year later, however, the cancer returned. "It was disappointing and I felt very prepared for the next steps," Oswald says. "She gave me different options for treatment. I chose to do

another trial because I wanted to help others with this disease and because those already on the trial were having good results."

Managing a Chronic Disease

Once a week, Oswald now travels to UVA from her home in Amisville, Va., with one of her three daughters, who take turns accompanying their mom to her infusion treatments. "I have been managing very well. I have no real side effects. Just a little fatigue," she says. "I realize this is now a chronic condition, and I'm living with it as normally as possible."

"She's a very strong-willed person," says Oswald's daughter, Stephanie Settle. "She's found a way to balance this and hasn't stopped living. We're actually planning a family trip to Ireland. It's a new thing we started last year—to see countries we've never seen."

Duska adds: "Now that we have more options beyond chemotherapy to fight it, women can live with this disease with a good quality of life. Ideally, we'd like to cure this disease." ■

EXPLORING ALL OPTIONS

According to gynecologic oncologist Linda Duska, MD, close to half of all ovarian cancer patients treated at University of Virginia Cancer Center are involved in clinical trials. "I inform all of my patients with ovarian cancer about the trials currently available. This is a devastating disease, and I want my patients to have every possible opportunity to do well," Duska says. "Trials give women the opportunity to participate in cutting-edge therapies. Even if they're not interested, it is empowering for many to know that there are other options available to them."

Standard therapy is always available and can be effective. If, however, you are considering participating in a clinical trial, here are some points to keep in mind:

- ▶ This may allow you to help yourself and others by giving doctors a better understanding of whether a particular treatment is effective.
- ▶ There are possible risks, including side effects, to consider when participating in any clinical trial, so be sure to ask your care team.
- ▶ There is no guarantee that a trial will have a positive outcome, and not all patients are eligible for every study.

For more information about the trials currently available at UVA Cancer Center, go to cancer.uvahealth.com/research/clinical-trials.