

Fact sheet 15

Is there a link between ovarian cancer and using talcum powder?

We, Ovacome, are a support network for people affected by ovarian cancer in the UK. We provide information and support, raise awareness and put you in touch with others who are suffering from ovarian cancer.

There have been worries for some years that using talcum powder on the genital area, increases the risk of ovarian cancer.

Dr Adam Rosenthal and Professor Ian Jacobs have prepared a brief summary of the evidence for us. Dr Rosenthal is Honorary Senior Lecturer in Gynaecological Oncology at University College London. Professor Jacobs is Director of the Institute for Women's Health at University College London.

Research studies

Most of the evidence linking using talc with ovarian cancer is based on asking women with and without ovarian cancer if they have used talc.

In 2003 the results of 16 studies involving 12,000 women were analysed. The result was that using talc increased the risk of ovarian cancer by around a third.

However, there are a number of doubts and worries about these studies.

- There was no consistent evidence to prove that the more you use talc, the more at risk you are of getting

ovarian cancer. This is strange, as other cancer risks are related to exposure to the risk factor. For example, the more you smoke the more likely you are to get lung cancer. If talc really does cause ovarian cancer, why didn't all the studies show that the risk of ovarian cancer was related to the amount of talc used?

- Studies of this type involving women who already have ovarian cancer can suffer from bias, which can lead to inaccurate results. For example, women with ovarian cancer understandably look for a cause for their disease and may have been more likely to remember using talc than those who did not have cancer.

A large well-designed American study involving nearly 80,000 women found no link between using talc and the risk of ovarian cancer. There was a possible weak link to one particular type of ovarian cancer known as 'serous' ovarian cancer, but this may have been due to chance. This link with serous ovarian cancer was again suggested by a study in Australia in 2008, but the small (less than one fifth) increase in risk found was only just considered to be relevant in this study.

In this study the risk for women who used talc was not increased in those who had not had their fallopian tubes ligated (blocked) in order to have a sterilisation (to prevent them getting pregnant). This is odd because you would expect unblocked tubes to increase any real risk from talc,

..not knowing

as they would allow the talc to reach the ovaries along the same route as sperm travels to allow pregnancy.

In 2007, a combined analysis of nine studies looking at talc from contraceptive diaphragms (caps) failed to show any link between talc and ovarian cancer. This is reassuring, because you might expect that putting a diaphragm that has talc on it into the vagina might mean the ovaries are exposed to higher concentrations of talc, rather than simply applying it to the genital area.

Even if the risk of ovarian cancer is increased, studies suggest that using talc increases the risk of ovarian cancer by around a third. Although this may sound frightening, to put it into context, smoking and drinking increases the risk of oesophageal cancer by 30 times.

Ovarian cancer is a rare disease, and increasing a small risk by a third still gives a small risk.

Is there any other evidence?

The other evidence that using talc is associated with ovarian cancer comes from studies which have shown talc in the ovaries of women with the disease. There is also doubt about the significance of these studies because:

- not all studies ruled out the possibility that the talc came from the protective gloves worn by the scientists examining the ovaries, rather than from talc applied to the genital area;
- only a small number of ovaries were studied;
- talc was found in normal ovaries as well as cancerous ones; and

- finding talc in a patient with ovarian cancer is not the same as proving that the talc caused the cancer.

There are two other pieces of evidence worth mentioning. First, women who use talc appear to have lower levels of an antibody called MUC1 compared to women who don't use talc.

High MUC1 levels are associated with better results in patients with ovarian cancer. In theory, it is possible that any substance that reduces levels of MUC1 could somehow increase how likely a woman is to get ovarian cancer.

However, this weak link between talc and ovarian cancer is just speculation at the moment. With no convincing results from research studies, it is hard to imagine that talc is a significant cause of ovarian cancer.

Second, a recent study in the US found that variations in certain genes responsible for neutralising toxins from the environment might influence whether or not talc increased a person's risk of ovarian cancer. However, the effect seen was not very large, and needs to be confirmed in further studies.

What we know

We still do not know what really causes ovarian cancer. But it is likely to be a combination of many different inherited and environmental factors, rather than one cause such as talc.

We do know that women who become pregnant or take the oral contraceptive pill are at much lower risk of developing ovarian cancer.

We also know that women with two or more close relatives with ovarian cancer or breast cancer may have a higher chance developing ovarian cancer.

It is also important to remember that, out of the millions of women in England and Wales, many of whom use talc, only a very small number will develop ovarian cancer each year. So even if talc does increase the risk slightly, very few women who use talc will ever get ovarian cancer.

Also, if someone has ovarian cancer and used talc, it seems highly unlikely that using talc was the reason they developed the cancer.

More studies will be needed to work out exactly whether or not using talc causes ovarian cancer.

If you would like more information or you would like to discuss anything to do with ovarian cancer, phone our support line on 0845 371 0554, Monday to Friday from 9am to 4pm. Or, you can visit our website at www.ovacome.org.uk.

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