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'Silent killer' doesn't hush local woman, organization

Submitted by Brady Averill on September 20, 2007 - 2:46pm.
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At 34, Vickie Kahnke thought she was pregnant for the third time. But after expecting a baby for more than three months, she learned that she never was pregnant.

She had ovarian cancer.

At first, doctors thought otherwise. She was young. She had symptoms commonly associated arian cancer is called the silent killer. And the reason for that is because there aren't strong symptoms, like there are with breast cancer," Kahnke said. "So finding it early isn't common."

Most women have experienced those subtle and common symptoms, said Kathleen Gavin, executive director of the Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance. That's why it's important for women to pay attention if they persist every day for two weeks or more, she said. Then, she encourages them to see a doctor, preferably a gynecologist.

"It's so important for women to take those symptoms seriously and speak frankly with their doctors," she said.

Because there's no routine screening test for finding ovarian cancer like a pap smear for cervical cancer or a mammogram for breast cancer, it makes it all the more difficult for doctors to diagnose the cancer. Often, ovarian cancer has spread beyond the ovaries before its detected. But there are three tests that women whose symptoms persist can ask for- the CA-125 blood test, transvaginal ultrasound and vaginal-rectal pelvic exam. Kahnke hopes for the day when there's a routine screening test so women like her don't have to go months living with a misdiagnosis.

The alliance - based in Minneapolis - tries to get the word out about ovarian cancer, which affects thousands of new women every year. The National Cancer Institute estimates there will be 22,430 new cases of ovarian cancer and 15,280 deaths in 2007.

Creating awareness

As part of Ovarian Cancer Awareness month, the alliance held its 8th Annual Silent No More Walk/Run for Ovarian Cancer on Sept. 15 in Edina. The event drew more than 2,500 people. Abby and Barb Morrison joined Kahnke in the walk, as well as Heather Rectenwal, whose mother died from ovarian cancer.

Kahnke, now 43 and a participant for seven years, worked at and ran in the event this year. She, too, tries to educate women about ovarian cancer and its warning signs.

"I actively talk about it. I tell my story," she said.

To learn more about the Minnesota Ovarian Cancer Alliance's next major event, A Toast to Life, go to www.mnovarian.org/.

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- [Birthdays](#) (1) stories
- [Births](#) (24) stories
- [Burnsville-Eagan-Savage School Board](#) (30) stories
- [Business news](#) (19) stories
- [Church news](#) (43) stories
- [City News](#) (159) stories
- [City Politics](#) (3) stories
- [College News](#) (108) stories
- [Columnists](#) (124) stories
- [Corrections](#) (2) stories
- [County Politics](#) (3) stories
- [Courts](#) (77) stories
- [Dan Patch Days](#) (35) stories
- [Deaths](#) (60) stories
- [Election 2007](#) (11) stories
- [Engagements](#) (8) stories
- [Entertainment](#) (31) stories
- [Fire calls](#) (57) stories
- [General news](#) (388) stories
- [High School Sports](#) (3) stories
- [History](#) (3) stories
- [Legal Notices](#) (48) stories
- [Meeting agendas](#) (36) stories
- [Military](#) (14) stories
- [National Politics](#) (11) stories
- [Newsmakers](#) (142) stories
- [Opinions](#) (83) stories
- [Pets](#) (9) stories
- [Photographs](#) (152) stories
- [Police](#) (211) stories
- [Polls](#) (34) stories
- [Prior Lake-Savage Area School Board](#) (47) stories
- [Regional news](#) (69) stories
- [Reunions](#) (4) stories
- [School News -- Burnsville-Eagan-Savage](#) (192) stories
- [School news -- Prior Lake-Savage Area](#) (139) stories
- [School news -- Shakopee](#) (3) stories
- [Schools](#) (205) stories
- [Scott County Fair](#) (1) stories
- [Scott County news](#) (24) stories
- [Sheriff](#) (3) stories
- [Sports](#) (786) stories
- [State Politics](#) (26) stories
- [Trail Blazers](#) (1) stories
- [Video Clips](#) (2) stories
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