

# A pain in the ovaries

On a flight back to Toronto from Europe, Jennifer Sorensen was overcome by throbbing pain in her pelvic area and at the base of her spine. By the time the inflight movie came on, she was in agony. Several doctors on board came to her aid. The pain became so bad that the pilot considered making an emergency landing in Montreal. "I was writhing on the floor and I thought, 'Oh, my God, I'm dying. I won't have a chance to call my mother. I'm only 32.'" An ultrasound revealed the cause: a cyst on her right ovary the size of a grapefruit.

Sorensen's flight from hell is not uncommon. While about 10 per cent of all women will at some point develop an ovarian cyst, the majority are benign. Cysts are usually a result of ovarian function gone wrong. Symptoms can be unremarkable, mimicking normal cycle problems such as bloating or discomfort, says Dr. Vyta Senikas, associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at McGill University in Montreal. Sometimes, however, the lower abdominal pain can be sudden and severe, as in Sorensen's

Cysts on ovaries can grow to the size of a grapefruit or larger and cause severe abdominal pain.

case, because fluid from the leaking cyst irritates the abdomen.

Some ovarian cysts are formed when a follicle around a maturing egg fails to rupture and release the egg, resulting in continued fluid buildup. Most will disintegrate over the course of three menstrual cycles, although they should be monitored. Doctors usually prescribe birth control pills to prevent future cysts from forming.

Less common are dermoid cysts, like Sorensen's, which tend to affect women ages 18 to 45. They are composed of tissue and fluid and can grow to the size of a grapefruit or larger. Treatment entails either a laparoscopy, in which small incisions are made in the lower abdomen to remove the cyst, or major surgery to take out larger cysts or the entire ovary. Less than 10 per

cent of dermoid cysts ever become cancerous (but there is no known link to ovarian cancer).

Ever since Sorensen's benign cyst was removed through laparoscopy, she has gone for regular checkups to monitor her condition. Once you've had a cyst, she says, you feel like you always have to be vigilant.

KATE BARKER



## preventing ovarian cancer

While most women's ovary problems are not life-threatening, ovarian cancer is. September is Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month and the National Ovarian Cancer Association is spreading the word with *Listen to the Whispers*, an education program to make women aware of early warning signs of this disease that frequently goes undiagnosed. The program includes a video and handouts. Kits are available for loan to any group or person interested in leading an information session in their community or workplace. The video, *Listen to the Whispers*, will also air on WTN on Sept. 27 at 8 p.m. ET and Sept. 30 at noon ET. Donations are welcome and go toward expanding the program nationally. For information, log on to [www.ovariancanada.org](http://www.ovariancanada.org) or call 1/877/413-7970. In Toronto, call 416/217-1266.