**New test could slash ovarian cancer deaths**

By [Pat Hagan for MailOnline](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/search.html?s=&authornamef=Pat+Hagan+for+MailOnline)
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A new blood test that detects ovarian cancer at an early stage could save thousands of lives every year in the UK. The test works by looking for signs of five different chemicals.

These chemicals are given off by tumour cells as they grow. Experiments show that when they are all present there is a very high chance that cancerous cells are forming on the ovaries.

More than 6,000 women a year in the UK are diagnosed with cancer of the ovaries and the annual death toll is around 4,500. The disease accounts for 5 per cent of cancer deaths in women.

It's sometimes known as a 'silent killer' because, for many victims, symptoms appear only once it is already fairly advanced.

According to some estimates, three out of four sufferers are not diagnosed until the cancer has spread to other parts of the body.

The main risk factors include a family history of the disease, having already had breast cancer and starting periods at a young age. Women who are overweight or who use hormone replacement therapy are also thought to be more at risk.

The new blood test is more than 90 per cent accurate at detecting tumour cells, according to recent trial results. HealthLinx, the Australian firm that makes it, came up with the test by identifying chemicals  -  or 'biomarkers'  -  that are given off by ovarian cancer cells.

Early detection means women could have surgery or radiotherapy before the cancer spreads. The test, called OvPlex, could be used to carry out regular checks on women most at risk from the disease, such as those with a family history. But it could one day be used to screen all women for signs of tumours.

Scientists have spent years searching for a way of detecting the deadly disease at an earlier stage.

Most trials have so far focused on a blood test detecting CA125. This is given off by ovarian cancer cells and circulates in the blood stream.

Over the last three years, a major UK trial involving 200,000 women has been investigating whether testing for this marker can help GPs identify patients in the very early stages of disease.

The results are not expected to be available for at least a year. But there are already doubts about how useful the CA125 test will be.

According to Cancer Research UK, only half of all women in the early stages of ovarian cancer and 80 per cent of those with more advanced tumours have raised levels of this marker.

Even in those who have the marker, it can often be due to conditions such as endometriosis, which affects the womb's lining.

As a result, the CA125 test is likely to be used only alongside other less convenient testing methods, such as ultrasound examinations.

Professor Karol Sikora, professor of cancer medicine at Hammersmith Hospital, London, says that looking at a 'panel' of cancer biomarkers, as the new test does, was a better way of testing for the disease than focusing on a single one.

He says: 'If ovarian cancer can be picked up in its early stages, patients have an 80 per cent chance of survival. If it's in the later stages, they only have a 10 per cent chance of survival.

'The best kind of blood test is likely to involve a panel of biomarkers. Unfortunately, the trials involving CA125 have shown it's not good at picking up ovarian cancer on its own.'

Kate Law, clinical trials director for Cancer Research UK, said tests that speed up diagnosis were important.

But she stressed: 'More research would be needed to evaluate this test against current methods of diagnosis.'

The OvPlex test, which costs £75, is licensed in Australia already; it should be available to women in this country in the next two years.