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[Ovarian cancer Walk of Hope set for Sunday](#)

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Rory Lau was a competitive swimmer and healthy when an ultrasound for an intestinal hernia revealed she had ovarian cancer.

The tumour in the 16-year-old's body was the size of a football. But because her abdominal muscles were so strong, the doctors couldn't tell from the outside that something was wrong.



Rory Lau, shown in this 2008 photo

Lau had her left ovary and fallopian tube removed, underwent chemo and beat the odds. She wasn't expected to survive.

That was 20 years ago. Today, Lau remains cancer-free. The mother of two who works as a medical technologist is co-chair of this year's [Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope in Windsor](#), which goes on Sunday.

"My ultimate hope is for awareness," Lau said.

If Lau hadn't had that hernia – which was in a way linked to the growing tumour, all of which was causing her internal organs to shift around within the walls of her very strong swimmer's body – the doctors might never have figured out she had cancer. The doctors couldn't tell from the ultrasound alone, either. Lau had to have surgery to remove the mass before the doctors could know for sure it was cancer.

Ovarian cancer is very hard to detect because the symptoms can be very vague – anything from abdominal pain to irregular periods or unusual weight gain or weight loss. Still, it's the most fatal of all women's cancers and is often under-diagnosed, according to Elisabeth Ross, CEO of [Ovarian Cancer Canada](#).

And there is [no way to screen for it early](#), either.

Because the symptoms are so vague, it often happens that women are diagnosed in later stages of the illness, when their survival rate is lower, Ross said in a statement on Tuesday.

Women – and their doctors – need to take more notice, Lau said, and ask lots of questions. A lot of doctors don't think of ovarian cancer right away when they're faced with some of the symptoms, she said. Women shouldn't be afraid to push for more testing or seek a second opinion if they aren't convinced.

In 2012, if the cancer is detected early, ovarian cancer has a survival rate of more than 90 per cent, according to OCC.

Over the past 20 years, treatment and survival rates have vastly improved since she was diagnosed and treated, Lau said.

“At 16, you think you're invincible,” Lau said, describing how strangely confident she was back then. “But when you go through treatment it takes out a lot.”

Lau said she is surprised to see how many people here in Windsor know someone who knows someone who had ovarian cancer. Is not so rare as we might think, she said, and it affects younger women more often than we might expect.

Along with more awareness, Lau wants to support OCC and researchers in developing a reliable detection method. There is no single reliable early screening test. In addition, it's a misconception that a pap test can screen for this type of cancer. Pap tests screen for cervical cancer only.

In Canada, more than 2,600 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year, and more than half will die as a result.

Dr. John Mathews, the lead for systemic therapy at the Windsor Regional Cancer Centre, said there are about 30 to 35 new ovarian cancer diagnoses in Windsor and the region each year. If the cancer is caught very early, surgery is usually enough to cure it, he said. But because it's often not caught until later stages, the cancer has already spread and the prognosis worsens markedly. In its later stages, the best that surgery and chemotherapy can do is buy the patient a few more years of life, he said.

While the risk for this type of cancer rises after age 50, young women can also be diagnosed. The disease can be hereditary – a history of cervical or breast cancer in the family can predispose some women to developing this type of cancer.

“Like in many cancers, we don't really know why people get ovarian cancer,” Mathews said. There are no specific risk factors, he said, although not having any past pregnancies, long-term use of hormones and being overweight or obese do come up as contributing factors in some cases.

Sunday's Ovarian Cancer Canada Walk of Hope will be held at Malden Park. For more details and to register, visit ovariancancerwalkofhope.ca or call Brian Rivait at 519-979-1407.


Proceeds from the walk support awareness initiatives, research and services for patients and their families. More than 40 cities in Canada host the walk each year.

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