

A young woman with short dark hair is sitting on a bed in a room with green walls. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and white leggings. She is hugging a yellow crocheted pillow and looking down with a sad expression. The room has a metal headboard and a striped pillow.

Helping Her
Manage:

Abdominal Bloating

NOT SURE IF IT'S A MEDICAL EMERGENCY? STOP and CALL

Abdominal bloating caused by ascites (a buildup of fluid in the abdomen) is a serious condition that requires urgent attention.

Call your oncologist right away if your loved one develops any of the following symptoms along with abdominal bloating:

- Shortness of breath
- Nausea and vomiting
- Difficulty moving her bowels
- Swelling of feet and legs

Managing Abdominal Bloating In Cancer

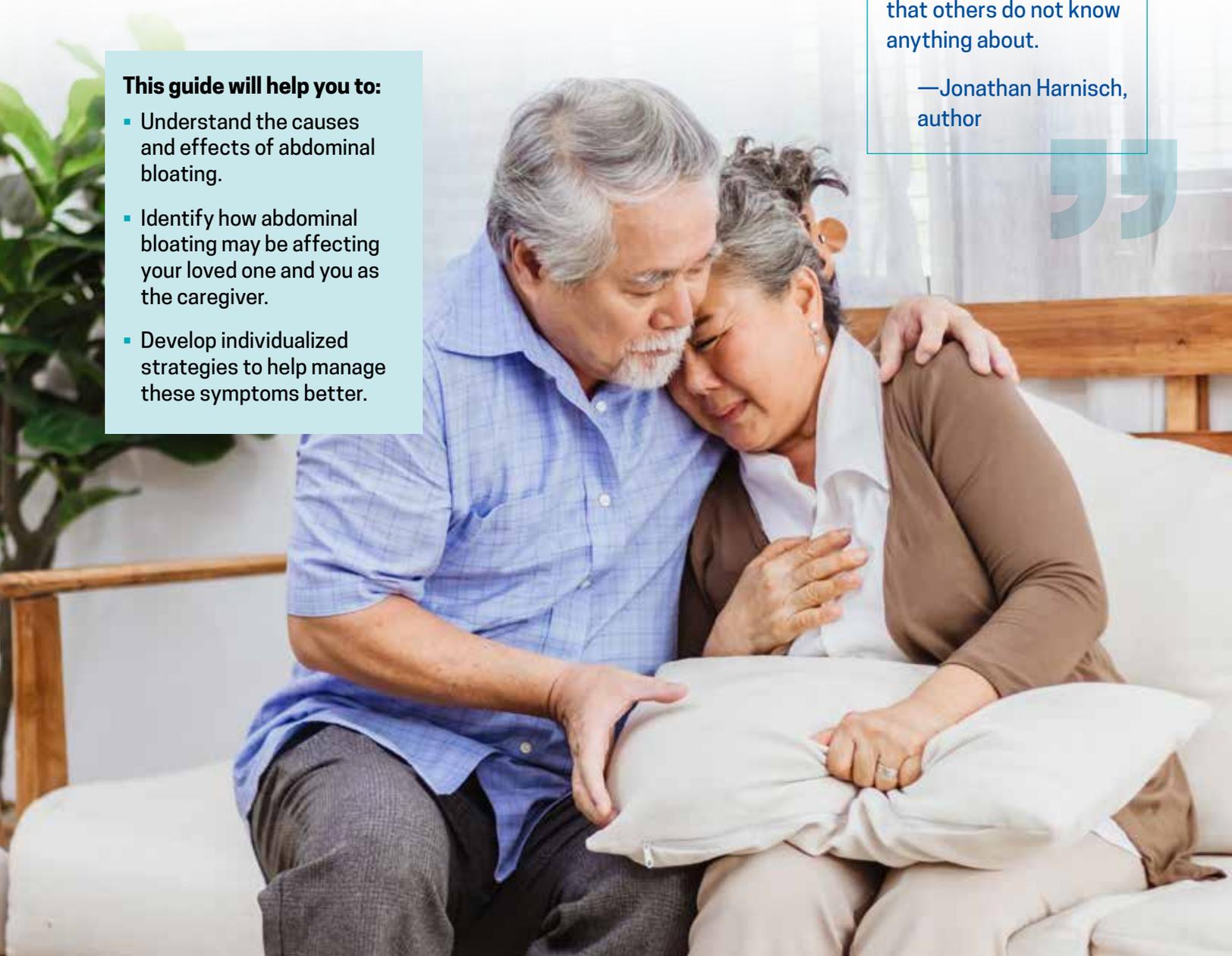
Abdominal bloating is a common symptom experienced by those with gynecologic cancer. Whether caused by gas or fluid, it can be very uncomfortable. When possible, it is best to identify and treat the underlying cause. When that is not possible, there are strategies to reduce the discomfort of abdominal bloating. Working closely with your loved one's gynecologic health care team and trying different strategies can help you both find what works best.

The strongest people are not those who show strength in front of the world but those who fight and win battles that others do not know anything about.

—Jonathan Harnisch,
author

This guide will help you to:

- Understand the causes and effects of abdominal bloating.
- Identify how abdominal bloating may be affecting your loved one and you as the caregiver.
- Develop individualized strategies to help manage these symptoms better.



How Do Patients with Cancer Describe Abdominal Bloating?

Abdominal bloating can affect many aspects of your loved one's life, including the ability to resume regular activities. Here are some ways that patients describe problems caused by abdominal bloating:

What about you?

Check off any items that your loved one is experiencing. Write in anything else related to abdominal bloating that she may be going through.

- Feeling bloated**
- Having a distended abdomen**
- Lack of appetite**
- Feeling full easily**
- Feeling uncomfortable**
- Difficulty catching my breath (feeling of "air hunger")**
- Feeling short of breath**
- Difficulty bending over**
- Feeling that my clothes are too tight around my waist or don't fit anymore**
- Feeling upset about how I look and feel**



What Causes Abdominal Bloating?

Abdominal bloating is a swelling (or distention) of the abdomen. It can have different causes which will affect how it is treated. It's important to try to determine what is causing your loved one's abdominal bloating.

I noticed that my belly was getting a little bit bigger. And one day I just twisted a little and I could feel something swish.

Gas in the Stomach

Sometimes bloating is caused by a buildup of air (gas) in the stomach, small intestine, or colon. The air is either swallowed or is produced when certain foods are digested. When abdominal bloating is related to gas, it generally comes and goes and is often related to foods that have been eaten. The abdomen will often have a drum-like or high pitched sound if you tap on it. It may sound like your loved one's stomach is growling or rumbling.

Ascites

Sometimes bloating is caused by the buildup of fluid in the abdominal cavity, which usually causes a gradual increase in abdominal size. This is called ascites. The abdomen will often have a dull sound if tapped and the swelling may shift with movement. Sometimes, ascites can cause severe distention of the abdomen.

For women with gynecologic cancer, ascites is most often caused by tumor cells in the abdominal cavity. Ascites is treated differently than bloating caused by gas.

It is important to talk to your loved one's cancer care provider about any new or worsening abdominal bloating. They can determine the cause and help find the best ways to manage it.

Definition:

Abdominal Distention

An enlarged or swollen abdomen accompanied by the sensation of increased abdominal pressure ("feeling bloated").

YOUR THOUGHTS

In what ways have abdominal bloating affected your loved one? How has it affected you as a caregiver?

How do these problems affect you and your family on a daily basis?

What are some of the biggest barriers to managing these problems?

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____
- 5) _____

Now, let's explore some strategies and ways to help you overcome these barriers.

Strategies for Preventing and Managing Abdominal Bloating

Abdominal bloating can be uncomfortable and it can affect your loved one's overall quality of life. Here you can explore different types of strategies to help prevent and manage abdominal bloating. Pick those that you think may work for you and your loved one.

I was shopping with my daughter and I said, 'I'm not buying any more clothes...I look like I'm seven months pregnant!'

Abdominal Bloating from Gas

Help her stay active. Mild exercise such as walking will help move gas forward so it can be passed. If your loved one is unable to exercise, encourage her to change her position from side-to-side in bed every 30 to 60 minutes until the gas has moved forward and has been able to pass.

Manage her diet. Assisting with your loved one's diet can help to reduce abdominal bloating caused by gas. Here are some beneficial tips your loved one can try:

- **Prevent constipation.** Help her stay hydrated and get physical activity as tolerated.
- **Avoid foods that create gas**—such as too many high-fiber foods, beans, broccoli, cauliflower, onions, raisins, and apricots.
- **Avoid swallowing air.** This can happen when drinking carbonated beverages, drinking through a straw, chewing gum, or eating too quickly.
- **Sit up after meals.** This helps food to pass through the digestive tract more easily.
- **Try eliminating lactose (dairy products).** This may help if gas production is caused by lactose intolerance.

Medicines. Anti-gas medications, such as simethicone (Phazyme®, Flatulex®, Gas-X®, Mylicon®), may be helpful. "Pre-meal" anti-gas tablets, such as Beano®, can help prevent gas buildup. Talk with your loved one's cancer care provider to see if there are any new treatments available

Learn More

Go to the guide **Helping Her Manage: Bowel Problems** in this series for information and strategies related to constipation caused by cancer treatment.



Abdominal Bloating from Ascites

Whenever possible, chemotherapy is used to treat ascites caused by gynecologic cancer. If chemotherapy is successful in killing the cancer cells, ascites may generally go away. If chemotherapy is no longer effective in treating the cancer and ascites, there are other strategies that can be used to reduce the discomfort from ascites.

Talk with her cancer care provider. This is the first place you should turn to help your loved one treat ascites. Here are some strategies they might suggest:

- **Paracentesis.** This is a procedure in which your loved one's cancer care provider places a drain in her abdomen to relieve the fluid buildup. This does not cure the problem and the fluid may come back, but it usually helps to relieve the pressure. The drain can be temporary or can stay in place for some time.
- **Prescription pain medicines.** These may help relieve the pain from severe abdominal bloating.
- **Dietician/Nutritionist.** This specialist can help your loved one develop a nutritious diet that minimizes gas and fluid buildup. Ask for a referral.

Try at-home techniques. In addition to talking with her cancer care provider, your loved one can take simple steps at home to prevent and manage the discomfort of abdominal bloating caused by ascites. Help her to:

- Lie on her side or sit in a recliner with her feet elevated. Find the most comfortable position.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes that do not put pressure on her abdomen.
- Keep her skin clean and dry. Check skin folds for any redness or irritation. Use moisturizing lotions and oils to prevent dryness and cracking of skin.
- Eat smaller meals more often. Increase the intake of high protein foods, such as meat and eggs.
- Avoid foods that cause gas and may increase bloating.
- Use relaxation, imagery, music, or distraction to reduce discomfort.



Definition:

Ascites

A buildup of fluid in the abdominal cavity.



Learn More

If your loved one experiences pain, go to the guide **Helping Her Manage: Pain and Peripheral Neuropathy** in this series to learn more about managing pain caused by gynecologic cancer.

QUICK REFERENCE

Below is a recap of the general strategies that can help you as a caregiver manage your loved one's abdominal bloating. Check those that you would like to try with your loved one. You can use this page as a quick reference.

- Help her stay active. (Page [x:6])
- Help her manage her diet and nutrition. (Page [x:6])
- Try over-the-counter medicines and ask her health care team for recommendations. (Page [x:6])
- Talk with her health care team about treatment for and management of ascites. (Page [x:7])
- Try at-home management techniques for ascites to help keep your loved one comfortable. (Page [x:7])

Resources & Links

- ????

YOUR GOALS & STRATEGIES

What strategies make the most sense to you? How can you and your family use those strategies in your own life?

Create a Plan:

Think about specific goals you want to accomplish. Just tackle one or two goals at a time.

My goal is to _____ (what do you hope will happen) **by** _____ (timeframe) **so that** _____ (why it's important).

What specific strategies will you use to reach your goal? Think about the very next steps you can take to get started.
