

# Cervical Health

## What is cervical cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. Cancer is always named for the part of the body where it starts, even if it spreads to other body parts later. When cancer starts in the cervix, it is called cervical cancer. The cervix is the lower, narrow end of the uterus. Also known as the womb, the uterus is where a baby grows when a woman is pregnant. The cervix connects the upper part of the uterus to the vagina (the birth canal). Cervical cancer is the easiest female cancer to prevent, with regular screening tests and follow-up. It also is highly curable when found and treated early.

## Who gets cervical cancer?

All women are at risk for cervical cancer. It occurs most often in women over age 30. It is important to get tested for cervical cancer because 6 out of 10 cervical cancers occur in women who have never received a Pap test or have not been tested in the past five years. The human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex, is the main cause of cervical cancer. Keep in mind, many people will have an HPV infection during their lifetime, but few women will get cervical cancer.

## Are there tests that can prevent cervical cancer or find it early?

There are two tests that can help prevent cervical cancer or find it early:

- The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for precancers, cell changes on the cervix that might become cervical cancer if they are not treated. The Pap test can find cancer early, when treatment is most effective.

A Pap test is a simple test done by a health care provider in a clinic. The provider will take a sample of cells from the cervix to test for any changes. Ask your health care provider how often a Pap test is needed for you.

- The HPV test looks for the virus that can cause these cell changes. Talk with your health care provider about whether the HPV test is right for you.

## What raises a woman's chance of getting cervical cancer?

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV. You are more likely to get HPV if you started having sex at an early age, or if you or your partner have had sex with several others. However, any woman who has ever had sex is at risk for HPV. There are many types of HPV. Usually HPV will go away on its own, but if it does not, it may cause cervical cancer over time.

## Other things can increase your risk of cervical cancer. They include:

- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection.
- Not having regular Pap tests.
- Not following up with your health care provider if you had an abnormal Pap test result.
- Having HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, or another condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems.
- Smoking cigarettes.
- Using birth control pills for a long time (five or more years).
- Having given birth to three or more children.

*(more on back)*

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## **What are the symptoms:**

- Early on, cervical cancer may not cause signs and symptoms
- Irregular bleeding
- Bleeding or pain during sexual contact
- Vaginal discharge

## **How can I prevent it?**

- Discuss the HPV vaccine with your health care provider. It protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. It is given in a series of three shots. The vaccine is recommended for 11 and 12 year old girls. It is also recommended for girls and women aged 13 through 26 who did not get any or all of the shots when they were younger. (Note: The vaccine can be given to girls beginning at age 9.)
- See your health care provider regularly for a Pap test.
- Follow up with your health care provider if your test results are not normal.
- Don't smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

## **Resources:**

National Cancer Institute

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge)

National Cervical Cancer Coalition

[www.nccc-online.org](http://www.nccc-online.org)

### **For More Information:**

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