

Cervical Cancer Facts



Cervical cancer is the easiest gynecological cancer to prevent with regular screening tests and follow-up. Learn basic information about cervical cancer and how to prevent and recognize it.

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. The cervix connects the vagina (the birth canal) to the upper part of the uterus. The uterus (or the womb) is where a baby grows when a woman is pregnant.

Cervical cancer is preventable with regular screening tests and follow-up. It also is highly curable when found and treated early. Although cervical cancer occurs most often in women over age 30, all women are at risk for cervical cancer. Each year approximately 12,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 4,000 women die from the disease.¹

What puts me at greater risk?

The main cause of cervical cancer is the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. Many people will have an HPV infection at some time in their lives, but because HPV usually goes away on its own, few will get cervical cancer.

Several other factors may affect your risk of developing cervical cancer, including:

- Smoking
- Having HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, or another condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems
- Using birth control pills for a long time
- Having given birth to three or more children

What are the symptoms?

Early on, cervical cancer may not cause signs and symptoms. Advanced cervical cancer may cause bleeding or discharge from the vagina that is not normal for you, such as bleeding after sex. If you have any of these signs, see your doctor, nurse, or health care professional. The symptoms may be caused by something else, but the only way to know is to get checked.

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How can I find out if I have cervical cancer?

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

- The **Pap test** (or Pap smear) is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available. The Pap test only screens for cervical cancer; it does not screen for any other gynecological cancer. It looks for precancers, or cell changes, on the cervix that can be treated, so that cervical cancer is prevented. A Pap test can also identify cervical cancer early, when treatment is most effective. The Pap test is recommended for all women starting at age 21.
- The **HPV test** looks for HPV—the virus that can cause precancerous cell changes and cervical cancer. The HPV test may be used with women aged 30 years and older, or at any age for those who have abnormal Pap test results. Talk with your doctor about whether the HPV test is right for you.

Cervical cancer is preventable with regular screenings, and it is highly treatable if cancer is detected early.

If you are 30 or older, and your screening tests are normal, your chance of getting cervical cancer in the next few years is very low. For that reason, your doctor may tell you that you will not need another screening test for up to three years. If your doctor says that you have cervical cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist—a doctor trained to treat cancers like this. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.

How can I prevent cervical cancer?

There are many ways to prevent or reduce your risk for cervical cancer:

- Get the HPV vaccine. It protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers, and is recommended for girls and women aged 11 through 26
- See your doctor regularly for a Pap test to find cervical precancerous cells
- Follow up with your doctor if your Pap test results are not normal
- Don't smoke
- Use condoms during sex**
- Limit your number of sexual partners

About the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP)

NBCCEDP provides public education, free and low-cost breast and cervical cancer screenings, and diagnostic services to low-income, uninsured, and underserved women. If you have a low income or do not have insurance, you may be able to get a free or low-cost Pap test through the NBCCEDP in your community.

** HPV infection can occur in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, as well as in areas that are not covered. While the effect of condoms in preventing HPV infection is unknown, condom use has been associated with a lower rate of cervical cancer.

References

- 1 U.S. Cancer Statistics Working Group. *United States Cancer Statistics: 1999–2006 Incidence and Mortality Web-based Report*. Atlanta, GA: Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and National Cancer Institute; 2010. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/uscs>.



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