

# **Cervical Cancer: Get the Facts About Gynecological Cancers**

There are five main types of cancer that affect a woman's reproductive organs: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulva. As a group, they are referred to as gynecologic (GY-neh-kuh-LAH-jik) cancer. (A sixth type of gynecologic cancer is the very rare fallopian tube cancer.) This fact sheet about cervical cancer is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer campaign. The campaign helps women get the facts about gynecologic cancer, providing important "inside knowledge" about their bodies and 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. The cervix connects the vagina (the birth canal) to the upper part of the uterus. The uterus (or womb) is where a baby grows when a woman is pregnant.

Cervical cancer is the easiest gynecologic cancer to prevent with regular screening tests and followup. 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. Each year, approximately 12,000 women in the United States get cervical cancer. The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer. HPV is a common virus that is passed from one person to another during sex. At least half of sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives, but few women will get cervical cancer.

## **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. They may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to see your doctor.

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

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

- **The Pap test** (or Pap smear) looks for precancers, cell changes, on the cervix that can be treated, so that cervical cancer is prevented. The Pap test also can find cervical cancer early, when treatment is most effective. The Pap test is recommended for all women. The Pap test only screens for cervical cancer. It does not screen for any other gynecologic cancer.
- **The HPV test** looks for HPV - the virus that can cause precancerous cell changes and cervical cancer. Talk with your doctor, nurse, or other health care professional about whether the HPV test is right for you.

### **When should I get tested for cervical cancer?**

The Pap test is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available. You should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21, or within three years of the first time you have sex - whichever happens first. The HPV test often is used to screen for cervical cancer, along with the Pap test, in women aged 30 years and older. It also is used to provide more information when a Pap test has unclear results.

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. But you should still go to the doctor regularly for a check-up that may include a pelvic exam.

It also is important for you to continue getting a Pap test regularly - even if you think you are too old to have a child, or are not having sex anymore. If you are older than 65 and have had normal Pap test results for several years, or if you have had your cervix removed (during an operation called a hysterectomy), your doctor may tell you it is okay to stop getting regular Pap tests.

## **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.

## **In addition to having HPV, these things also can increase your risk of cervical cancer:**

- 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 (five or more years).
- Having given birth to three or more children.

## **How can I prevent cervical cancer?**

- Get the HPV vaccine. 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 doctor regularly for a Pap test that can find cervical precancers.
- 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.

\* 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.

## **What should I do if my doctor says I have cervical cancer?**

If your doctor says that you have cervical cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist - a doctor who has been trained to treat cancers like this. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.

### **Where can I find free or low-cost Pap tests?**

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 National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. To learn more, call 1-800-CDC-INFO or visit [www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp)

### **Where can I find more information about cervical and other gynecologic cancers?**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 1-800-CDC-INFO or go to [www.cdc.gov/cancer](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer)

CDC Webpage: [Basic Information About Cervical Cancer](#)

National Cancer Institute: 1-800-4-CANCER or [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

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