

Cervical Cancer

There are five main types of cancer that affect a woman's reproductive organs: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar. 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) *National Gynecologic Cancer Awareness 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. 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. In 2004,* 11,892 women in the United States were told they had cervical cancer.†

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. At least half of sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives.

Keep in mind, many people will have an HPV infection at some time in their lives, but few women will get cervical cancer.

* The most recent year for which statistics are currently available.

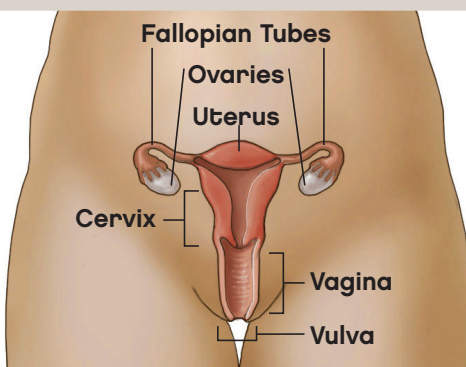
† U.S. Cancer Statistics Working Group. United States Cancer Statistics: 2004 Incidence and Mortality. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Cancer Institute; 2007.

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 HPV test looks for the virus that can cause these cell changes.**

The Pap test is recommended for all women. Talk with your doctor, nurse, or other health care professional about whether the HPV test is right for you. Getting a Pap test regularly can find precancerous changes that can be treated, so that cervical cancer is prevented. And a Pap test can find cervical cancer early, when treatment is most effective.



When should I get tested for cervical cancer?

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 Pap test is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available.

In addition to the Pap test—the main test for cervical cancer—the HPV test may be used for screening women aged 30 years and older, or at any age for those who have unclear Pap test 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. Other things can increase your risk of cervical cancer. They include:

- Not having regular Pap tests.
- Not following up with your doctor if you had a Pap test result that is not normal.
- Having HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, or another condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems.
- Smoking.

How can I prevent it?

- 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 precancer.
- Follow up with your doctor if your test results are not normal.
- Don't smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.*
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

What are the symptoms?

Early on, cervical cancer usually does 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, talk to your doctor. They may be caused by something else, but the only way to know is to see your doctor.

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.

Where can I find more information about cervical cancer?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 1-800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/cancer

National Cancer Institute: 1-800-4-CANCER or www.cancer.gov

* 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.

CDC Publication #99-9123, Revised December 2008

