



Cervical Cancer

<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Q: What is cervical cancer?

A: Cancer is a disease that happens when body cells don't work right. The cells divide really fast and grow out of control. These extra cells form a tumor. Cervical cancer is cancer in the cervix, the lower, narrow part of the uterus (womb). The uterus is the hollow, pear-shaped organ where a baby grows during a woman's pregnancy. The cervix forms a canal that opens into the vagina (birth canal), which leads to the outside of the body.

Most cases of cervical cancer are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a virus that is passed from person to person through genital contact, most often during vaginal and anal sex. You are more likely to get HPV if you have multiple partners. However, any woman who has ever had genital contact with another person can get HPV. Most women infected with HPV will not get cervical cancer. But, you are more likely to develop cervical cancer if you smoke, have HIV or reduced immunity, or don't get regular Pap tests. Pap tests look for changes in the cervical cells that could become cancerous if not treated.

If the Pap test finds serious changes in the cells of the cervix, the doctor will suggest more powerful tests such as a colposcopy (kol-POSS-koh-pee). This procedure uses a large microscope called a colposcope (KOL-poh-

skohp). This tool allows the doctor to look more closely at the cells of the vagina and cervix. This and other tests can help the doctor decide what areas should be tested for cancer.

Q: Why should I be concerned about cervical cancer?

A: Cervical cancer is a disease that can be very serious. However, it is a disease that you can help prevent. Cervical cancer happens when normal cells in the cervix change into cancer cells. This normally takes several years to happen, but it can also happen in a very short period of time.

Q: How can I help prevent cervical cancer?

A: Two kinds of vaccines (Cervarix and Gardasil) can protect girls and young women against the types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers. Cervarix and Gardasil are licensed, safe, and effective for females ages 9 through 26 years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that all girls who are 11 or 12 years old get 3 doses (shots) of either brand of HPV vaccine to protect against cervical cancer and precancer. (Gardasil also protects against most genital warts.) Girls and young women ages 13 through 26 should get all 3 doses of an HPV vaccine if they have not received all doses yet.

It is very important to get all 3 doses. No studies so far have shown whether or not 1 or 2 doses protect as well as getting 3 doses.

Gardasil is also licensed, safe, and effective for males ages 9 through 26 years. Boys and young men may choose to get this vaccine to prevent genital warts.



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People who have already had sexual contact before getting all 3 doses of an HPV vaccine might still benefit, but only if they were not infected with the HPV types included in the vaccine they received. The best way to be sure that a person gets the most benefit from HPV vaccination is to complete all three doses before sexual activity begins. Ask your doctor which brand of the vaccine is best for you.

The vaccine does not replace the need to wear condoms to lower your risk of getting other types of HPV and other sexually transmitted infections. Women who have had the HPV vaccine still need to have regular Pap tests. By getting regular Pap tests and pelvic exams, your doctor can find and treat any changing cells before they turn into cancer. Practicing safer sex is also very important. Below are additional things you can do to help protect yourself against HPV and cervical cancer.

- **Don't have sex.** The best way to prevent any STI is to not have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- **Be faithful.** Having sex with just one partner can also lower your risk. Be faithful to each other. That means that you only have sex with each other and no one else.

- **Use condoms.** HPV can occur in both female and male genital areas that are not covered by condoms. However, research has shown that condom use is linked to lower cervical cancer rates. Protect yourself with a condom every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

Q: How often should I get a Pap test?

A: Follow these guidelines:

- Have a Pap test every 2 years starting at age 21. Women 30 and older who have had three normal Pap tests in a row can now have one every 3 years.
- If you are older than 65, you may be able to stop having Pap tests. Discuss your needs with your doctor.
- If you had your cervix taken out as part of a hysterectomy, you may not need further Pap tests if the surgery was not due to cancer. Talk to your doctor.
- Talk with your doctor or nurse about when to begin testing, how often you should be tested, and when you can stop. ■



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For more information

To learn more about cervical cancer, please visit the following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web sites:

<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical>
<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge>

You can also find out more about cervical cancer by contacting womenshealth.gov at 1-800-994-9662 or the following organizations:

National Cancer Institute, NIH, HHS
Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccines for Cervical Cancer
Phone number: (800) 422-6237
Internet address: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/hpv-vaccines>

National Cancer Institute Cancer Information Service, NIH, HHS
Phone number: (800) 422-6237
Internet address: <http://www.cancer.gov/aboutnci/cis>

National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, CDC, NIH
Phone number: (800) 232-6348
Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp>

American Cancer Society
Phone number: (800) ACS-2345
Internet address: <http://www.cancer.org>

Gynecologic Cancer Foundation
Phone number: (800) 444-4441
Internet address: <http://www.thegcf.org>

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