



Women, mark your calendars

Regular screenings can help prevent cervical cancer

Thanks to regular screenings, cervical cancer is a lot less common than it used to be.¹ That's because Pap tests – the tests used to screen for cancer of the cervix – help doctors spot cancer and cells that could turn into cancer.² So just getting checked for cancer can actually help prevent you from getting it later.

When cervical cancer is detected early, it is easier to treat. Many times, it can be cured.³ That's why regular screenings are so important.

What is cervical cancer?

The cervix is the part of a woman's womb (or uterus) that connects to the birth canal (or vagina). Cancer of the cervix is almost always caused by the human papillomavirus, or HPV.² HPV is a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex.⁴ The virus is so common that most adults have had it at some point. Sometimes it goes away on its own, but other times it can cause changes in the cells of the cervix that can turn into cancer.³

Cervical cancer doesn't usually cause symptoms early on, so women ages 21 to 65 should have regular screenings – at least every three years.^{4,5} Later, cervical cancer can cause:^{3,4}

- Bleeding from the vagina after sex, between periods, or after menopause.
- Pain in the pelvis or lower belly.
- Pain during sex.
- Discharge from the vagina that isn't normal.

The Pap test can screen you for cervical cancer, and an HPV test can screen for the virus that causes cervical cancer.⁵ Talk with your doctor about which tests you should have, and how often you should be screened.

For more information, the latest research and treatment news and online support groups for women diagnosed with cervical cancer, check out the Cervical Cancer Health Center on WebMD. Go to webmd.com/cancer/cervical-cancer.



Sources

1 National Institutes of Health website: Cervical Cancer (accessed November 2014): report.nih.gov/nihfactsheets/viewfactsheet.aspx?csid=76.

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3 WebMD website: Cervical Cancer Health Center (accessed November 2014): webmd.com.

4 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: Cervical Cancer (accessed November 2014): cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/pdf/cervical_facts.pdf.

5 National Cancer Institute website: Pap and HPV Testing (accessed November 2014): cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/detection/Pap-HPV-testing.

6 American Cancer Society website: What are the risk factors for cervical cancer? (accessed November 2014): cancer.org.

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What can I do to prevent cervical cancer?

Any woman who has ever had sex is at risk for cervical cancer.⁴ But you are more likely to get cervical cancer if you:^{4,6}

- Have a family member who has had cervical cancer.
- Started having sex at an early age.
- Have used birth control pills for five years or more.
- Have had three or more full-term pregnancies.
- Were younger than 17 when you had your first baby.
- Have a weak immune system, because of HIV or another condition.
- Have HPV.

Some of these risk factors are beyond your control. But there are things you can do to lower your risk.⁶

- **Practice safe sex.** Limit your number of partners and use condoms. It is important to note that condoms do not prevent all HPV infections, because a person can have HPV on parts of the genitals that a condom doesn't cover. But cervical cancer rates are lower in women whose partners use condoms. Limiting your number of sex partners will make you less likely to be exposed to HPV.
- **Get the HPV vaccine,** if you are younger than 27.
- **Stay away from cigarettes.** Smoking makes you twice as likely to develop cervical cancer. If you smoke, talk to your doctor about quitting.
- **Consider using an IUD for birth control.** Being on birth control pills long-term raises your cervical cancer risk. Some studies show that women who have used an intrauterine device (IUD) for birth control are less likely to develop cervical and uterine cancer. Ask your doctor about the risks and benefits of using an IUD.
- **Stay at a healthy weight.** Being overweight increases your risk.

Seeing your doctor regularly and getting regular screenings can help prevent cervical cancer. Talk to your doctor about your family history and risk factors, and what screening schedule is right for you.

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