

# Frequently Asked Questions about Cervical Cancer

## What are the screening recommendations?

The American Cancer Society recommends women beginning annual pap tests 3 years after they become sexually active or at 21 if they have not become sexually active until after 18. For more information on their guidelines regarding pap tests, use the following link to their [website](#).

## What are the risk factors for cervical cancer?

It is important to remember that a risk factor is just that. You may have all the risk factors and never develop cervical cancer. You may not have any of the risk factors and have cervical cancer even if it is rare.

- Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)
- Smoking
- Immunosuppression (HIV)
- Chlamydia Infection
- Diet
- Oral Contraceptives (birth control pills)
- Multiple Full Term Pregnancies
- First Pregnancy at Young Age
- Diethylstilbestrol (DES)
- Family History
- Lack of screening (the most significant risk factor for development of cervical cancer.)

## What important facts show I know?

- No one should die from cervical cancer. If detected early, all deaths from cervical cancer can be prevented through appropriate treatment.
- Most cervical cancers develop over a relatively long period of time. During this time, abnormal tissue can be detected easily by a Pap test and then removed by a health care provider.
- The primary cause of cervical cancer is the Human Papilloma virus (HPV), the most common sexually transmitted virus in the United States.

- The FDA has recently approved vaccines, administered in a series of three injections, which prevent against 70% of all cervical cancers. The vaccines are recommended for females age 9-26

### What Is a PAP Test?

- A Pap test is a test that checks the cells of the cervix (the opening of the uterus) for changes that could lead to cancer.
- During a pelvic exam, the health care provider inserts a speculum into the vagina and collects some cells from the cervix with a swab.
- It is usually not painful and only takes a few minutes.

### Why Is a Pap test so Important?

- Women who have cervical cancer may not have any symptoms.
- Regular Pap tests and treatment, when needed, can prevent most cervical cancer.
- If cancer or pre-cancer develops, it can be found early and treated.

### What is cervical cancer?

- **Cervical cancer**, or **cancer of the cervix**, is cancer of the entrance to the uterus (womb). The cervix is the narrow part of the lower uterus, often referred to as the *neck of the womb*. Cervical cancer occurs most commonly in women over the age of 30.
- The American Cancer Society estimates that 11,270 diagnoses of cervical cancer will be made by the end of 2009 in the USA. Over 4,000 women in the USA die from cervical cancer each year.

### What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

- Often during the early stages people may experience no symptoms at all. That is why women should have regular cervical smear tests.
- The most common symptoms are:
  - Bleeding between periods
  - Bleeding after sexual intercourse
  - Bleeding in post-menopausal women
  - Discomfort during sexual intercourse
  - Smelly vaginal discharge
  - Vaginal discharge tinged with blood
  - Pelvic pain

## What is the cervix?

The cervix, or the neck of the womb, and the womb are both parts of a female reproductive system. The female reproductive system consists of:

- Vagina
- Uterus (womb), which includes the cervix
- Ovaries

Women have two ovaries, one on either side of the lower abdomen (pelvis). Each month one of the ovaries produces an egg. Each ovary is connected to the uterus by a tube called the Fallopian tube.

In between each menstrual period an egg travels down one of the fallopian tubes and into the uterus. They alternate - one month may be the left side, and the next month the right side. When the egg enters the womb its lining thickens in preparation; in case the egg is fertilized by a man's sperm. If fertilization does not occur the thickened lining of the uterus is shed - a period (menses) occurs.

The cervix is the opening from the uterus to the vagina. It is a tight muscle that is normally firmly shut, with a small opening to allow the sperm through and the flow from a menstrual period. During labor (childbirth) the cervix dilates open.

## What are the causes of cervical cancer?

Cancer is the result of the uncontrolled division of abnormal cells. Most of the cells in our body have a set lifespan; when they die new cells are produced to replace them. Abnormal cells can have two problems: 1. They don't die. 2. They continue dividing. This results in an excessive accumulation of cells which eventually form a lump - a tumor. Scientists are not completely sure why cells become cancerous. However, there are some risk factors which are known to increase the risk of developing cervical cancer. These risk factors include:

- **HPV (human papilloma virus)**

Human papilloma virus infection is a sexually transmitted virus. There are over 100 different types of HPVs - 15 types can cause cervical cancer; probably 99% of them. In addition there are a number of types which can cause [genital warts](#). It is estimated that HPV types 16 and 18 cause about 70% of cases cervical cancer while HPV types 6 and 11 cause 90% of genital warts.

Other HPV types can cause cervical intra-epithelial neoplasia (CIN) - the growth of abnormal cells on the surface of the cervix.

- **Many sexual partners, becoming sexually active early**

Cervical cancer-causing HPV types are nearly always transmitted as a result of sexual contact with an infected individual. Women who have had many sexual partners generally have a higher risk of becoming infected with HPV, which raises their risk of developing cervical cancer. There is also a link between becoming sexually active at a young age and a higher risk of cervical cancer.

If a woman develops cervical cancer it does not mean she had several sexual partners, or became sexually active earlier than most other females. It is just a risk factor. Women who only ever had one sexual partner can develop cervical cancer.

- **Smoking**

Smoking increases the risk of developing many cancers, including cervical cancer.

- **Weakened immune system**

People with weakened immune systems, such as those with HIV/AIDS, or transplant recipients taking immunosuppressive medications have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer.

- **Certain genetic factors**

Scientists at Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University found that women with certain gene variations appear to be protected against cervical cancer.

- **Long-term mental stress**

A woman who experiences high levels of stress over a sustained period may be undermining her ability to fight off HPV and be at increased risk of developing cervical cancer it can cause, scientists at the Fox Chase Cancer Center reported.

- **Giving birth at a very young age**

Women who gave birth before the age of 17 are significantly more likely to develop cervical cancer compared to women who had their first baby when they were aged 25 or over.

- **Several pregnancies**

Women who have had at least three children in separate pregnancies are more likely to develop cervical cancer compared to women who never had children.

- **Contraceptive pill**

Long-term use of the contraceptive pill slightly raises a woman's risk.

- **Other sexually transmitted diseases (STD)**

Women who become infected with chlamydia, gonorrhea, or syphilis have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. Studies have also found that HPV infections last longer if Chlamydia also is present.

## ■ Socio-economic status

Studies in several countries have revealed that women in deprived areas have significantly higher rates of cervical cancer, compared to women who live in other areas.

Studies have also found higher rates in women of working age in manual jobs, compared to women in non-manual jobs. The most likely reason is a difference in the proportion of women who have regular screening.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

American Cancer Society	<a href="http://www.cancer.org">www.cancer.org</a>
American Social Health Association	<a href="http://www.ashastd.org/hpv/hpv_overview.cfm">www.ashastd.org/hpv/hpv_overview.cfm</a>
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	<a href="http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/">www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/</a>
Medicare	<a href="http://www.medicare.gov/Health/Cervical.asp">www.medicare.gov/Health/Cervical.asp</a>
National Cancer Institute	<a href="http://www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/cancer_type/cervical/">www.cancer.gov/cancer_information/cancer_type/cervical/</a>
National Cervical Cancer Coalition	<a href="http://www.nccc-online.org">www.nccc-online.org</a>