

Cervical Cancer: *Just the Facts*



Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable and curable forms of cancer if diagnosed early. Since the early stages are typically symptom-free, women who receive regular Pap smears, also known as Pap tests, significantly reduce their risk by discovering an abnormality early when the chance for successful treatment is greater.

Risk Factors for Cervical Cancer

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), the biggest risk factor for cervical cancer is infection from the human papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted disease (STD). HPV causes changes on a woman's cervix that can lead to cervical cancer over time. To decrease your chance of getting HPV or other STDs, always use a condom when you have sex.

In addition to HPV, the ACS lists other factors that can contribute to cervical cancer, including:

- being sexually active
- smoking
- having human immunodeficiency virus (HIV – the virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS])
- long-term use of birth control pills
- having given birth to three or more children
- eating a diet low in fruits and vegetables
- having a family history of cervical cancer

Signs and Symptoms of Cervical Cancer

Pre-cancerous cells and early cervical cancer usually have no symptoms, however, once cervical cancer becomes invasive and has possibly grown into nearby tissue, symptoms

become present. The ACS lists the following as the most common symptoms:

- abnormal vaginal bleeding, such as bleeding after sex or between periods, and having longer or heavier than usual periods
- pain during sexual intercourse
- unusual vaginal discharge which may contain some blood or occur between periods
- pain in the pelvic region

See your doctor if you experience any of these signs or symptoms.

Cervical Cancer Screening

The best way to find cervical cancer early is to have regular screening tests. The tests for cervical cancer screening are the Pap test and the HPV test. These tests can be done separately or at the same time. During a Pap test, cells from the cervix are collected and examined under a microscope. The HPV test looks for the virus that can cause changes to the cells on the cervix.


The ACS recommends all women begin cervical cancer screening at age 21.* Vaccines are now available for preteens, teens and young adults to protect against HPV infection. Talk with your doctor about getting a vaccine and which screening test is best for you.

* Ask your doctor for age recommendations and risk guidelines.



The largest risk factor for cervical cancer is infection from HPV.

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