



# What women should know about **cervical cancer**

American Cancer Society Guidelines for  
the Early Detection of Cervical Cancer





# One of the best things you can do so you don't get cervical cancer is get regular testing for cervical cancer.

Changes in the cervix are often caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (pap-ah-LO-mah-VI-rus) or HPV. HPV infections can lead to cervical cancer.

- The Pap and HPV DNA tests look for changes in the cervix that may lead to cancer.
- If you have cervical cancer, the Pap and HPV DNA tests can find it early, when it's small and likely to be easier to treat.
- Your doctor or nurse can tell you how often you should have a Pap test.



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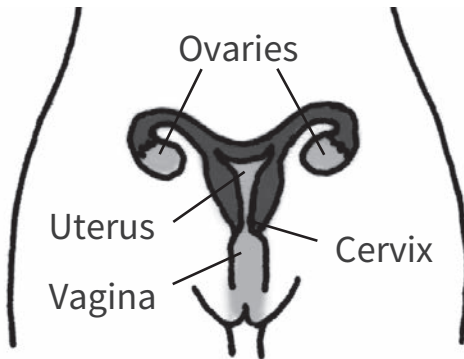
*I take care of myself so I can take care of my family.*

This booklet has answers to many questions women may have about:

- Keeping cervical cancer away or finding it early (called prevention and early detection)
- Pap tests
- HPV tests
- There are different types of HPV. This booklet is about the types of HPV that cause changes in the cervix, not the types that cause genital warts.

## What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer starts in the cells of the cervix, the part of the uterus that opens to the vagina.



# Do we know what causes cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is caused by a virus called HPV.

HPV can cause changes in the cervix. HPV is **not** the same as HIV (the virus that causes AIDS).

HPV is not a new virus, but we are learning more about it.

There are routine HPV vaccinations for girls at age 11 or 12. This vaccination series can be started as early as age 9.

## How does HPV lead to cervical cancer?

HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact. One way HPV is spread is through sexual contact, including vaginal, anal, or oral sex. It can cause an infection in the cervix. Most of the time, the infection doesn't last very long because your body is able to fight it. But in some women it can last longer.

Long-term HPV infections can change cervix cells into pre-cancer cells. Pre-cancer cells are not cancer, and they don't cause symptoms. Most cells with early pre-cancer changes go back to normal on their own. If they don't, they can be treated. Sometimes, if they aren't found and treated, the pre-cancer cells can turn into cancer. **Very few HPV infections lead to cervical cancer.**

# Who can get cervical cancer?

Because HPV is so common, any woman who has ever had any sexual contact with another person could get cervical cancer.

**But most women who get HPV do not get cervical cancer.**

Women who get their tests for cervical cancer as often as they should are much less likely to get cervical cancer.

Some women have a greater chance of getting cervical cancer if they:

- Have HPV and it doesn't go away
- Have HIV or AIDS
- Smoke

# Who can get HPV?

Any man or woman who has ever had any sexual contact with another person can get HPV, even if they only had one partner. The virus is spread by skin-to-skin contact. Because males can get HPV, vaccines are also given to pre-teen males to protect them from HPV infections. These vaccines are started at age 11 or 12, but can start as early as age 9.

Women who do not get tested, or who do not get tested as often as they should, have the highest chance of getting cervical cancer.



Condoms may not completely protect you from HPV, but they can help keep you from getting other infections that can be spread through sexual activity.

## Are there any symptoms of HPV?

No. Most people will never know they have or had HPV. But if the HPV doesn't go away on its own, it can cause changes in the cervix cells. Most of the time, these changes show up on Pap tests.

## How is HPV treated?

There's no treatment for the types of HPV that cause changes in cervix cells, but most HPV infections go away without treatment. There are no medicines to treat HPV.

There are treatments for the cell changes in the cervix that HPV can cause. If your Pap test shows cervix cell changes, your doctor or nurse will talk to you about treatments, if you need them.

# Will a Pap test tell me if I have HPV?

A Pap test cannot tell you if you have or had HPV. But it will likely tell you if you have any cervix cell changes that could be caused by HPV. This is the most important information for you and your doctor to know.

No test is perfect: If a woman has cervix cell changes that the Pap test doesn't find, then those changes will likely be found during the next Pap test. That's why it's important to get regular Pap tests.

# What is the test for HPV? When and how is it done?

There's an HPV test that looks for the types of HPV most likely to cause cervical cancer. The test is done just like a Pap test and can be done at the same time as the Pap test. You may have had an HPV test at your last visit to the doctor or clinic and didn't know it. The HPV test can be used (along with a Pap test) to look for cervical cancer in women who are age 30 or older, but it's not recommended for younger women.

# American Cancer Society Guidelines for the Early Detection of Cervical Cancer

These guidelines are not for women who have cervical cancer.

## **Ages 21 to 29 years**

Get a Pap test every 3 years.



**Ages 30 to 65 years**

Get a Pap test and an HPV test every 5 years (this is best) or get just a Pap test every 3 years.

If you are at high risk for cervical cancer, talk with your doctor or nurse to make a testing plan that's right for you.

**Women over 65 years of age**

Stop testing if you've had normal (or "negative") test results and if you had no pre-cancers for the past 10 years. Your most recent test should be within the past 5 years.

**Women who have had cervical pre-cancer**

Get tested for at least 20 years after the cell changes were found and treated.

**Women who had a hysterectomy and their cervix was removed**

Stop testing unless the surgery was done to treat cervical cancer or pre-cancer.

**Women who got the HPV vaccine**

Follow the same screening plan listed here.

## What do I do if I've had cervical cancer?

Women who have had cervical cancer should talk with their doctor about the testing plan that's right for them.

Women who have cervical cancer testing results that aren't normal may need to follow a different plan for a short time afterward.

I'm done having children. Do I still need to be tested?

Yes.

I've had a hysterectomy and still have my cervix. Do I need to be tested?

Yes.

What might put me at higher risk for cervical cancer?

You're at high risk for cervical cancer if you have a weak immune system (maybe from HIV infection, organ transplant, or using steroids for a long time) or because your mother took the drug DES while pregnant with you. If any of these apply, you may need to be tested more often.

Why do women no longer need yearly testing?

We know that HPV infections that don't go away can cause cervix cell changes, and those changes can lead to cervical cancer. But this happens very slowly – over 10 to 20 years. So, it's safe to wait longer between testing.

Some people may think that when it comes to medical tests, more is better. But more tests often lead to having tests that aren't needed and can cause people worry. These extra tests may even cause problems, and they add to health care costs. In the case of cervical cancer screening, yearly Pap tests are not better

than testing every 3 years or testing every 5 years with both the Pap and HPV tests.

Even though you don't need a yearly Pap test, you may still need to see your doctor or nurse every year for other health reasons.

## Why shouldn't women younger than 30 get an HPV test?

HPV is very common. Many women younger than 30 will have HPV. But these infections are more likely to go away in younger women. These HPVs do not need to be found because they won't cause any harm. If a young woman is tested and found to have HPV, then she's likely to have more tests, which could cause her to worry. Also, she will have tests for an HPV infection that would



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*When I turned 30, I had the HPV test.  
It was just like getting a Pap test.*



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*That's correct. You no longer need a Pap test every year, but you still need to have regular testing to find cervical cancer early.*

not have caused problems, and those tests could cause side effects that she would not want.

A young woman might need to have an HPV test if she has Pap test results that aren't normal and show cervix cell changes. In this case, an HPV test would be part of her follow-up; her age does not matter.

## If I'm 30 or over, should I be tested for HPV when I get my Pap test?

Having both the HPV and Pap test is now known to be the best way to be tested starting at age 30. You may want to take this booklet with you and ask about this when you get your next Pap test.

# Why is a Pap and an HPV test better than just a Pap test?

The Pap test finds cervix cell changes that are already there. The HPV test finds the virus that causes the cell changes before the changes happen. It also may lead to finding, or helping to find, some changes and cancers that are missed by the Pap test. This is because if a woman has 2 positive HPV tests, or 1 positive test that shows infection with a high-risk type of HPV, she will get more tests, even if her Pap test is negative. This helps find more cancers.

# What will happen if I have a positive HPV test?

Don't be scared ... just make sure you get a second HPV test in 1 year. Your doctor may also do a test that shows which HPV type you have.

One positive HPV test is very common, and about half the time the HPV goes away on its own. If the infection doesn't go away, it will grow very slowly. So waiting 1 year to repeat the test is safe.

Whether you have an HPV test or not, get your Pap test.

If both the HPV test and the Pap test are positive (meaning you have cervix cell changes and you have HPV), then you will need more tests. The tests that will be done depend on the results of your Pap test. Pap tests are no longer just “positive.” There are a range of “positive” Pap test results that describe the amount and type of cervix cell changes. Your next steps will depend on what changes are seen.

## How to prepare for a Pap test

- Do not get your Pap test done during your period.
- Do not have sex for 2 days before the test.
- Do not douche for 2 days before the test.
- Do not use tampons, birth control foams, jellies, or other creams or medicines in the vagina for 2 days before the test.

## Key points

- Most cervical cancers can be stopped before they happen. Finding cervix cell changes early with a Pap test and getting HPV tests, too, can help save your life. Cervical cancer is rare in women who get regular screening tests.
- See a doctor or nurse, and get tested. Talk to your doctor or nurse about the Pap test and HPV test to find out what tests and testing plan are right for you.
- HPV is a virus that can cause certain cancers. In females, HPV can cause cervical, vaginal, vulvar, anal, and throat cancers.
- There are vaccines that help protect both young males and females from this viral infection.

- Almost all women who have had sexual contact will have HPV at some time, but very few women will get cervical cancer.
- Most HPV infections go away on their own and don't cause cervix cell changes.
- HPV does not cause symptoms and cannot be treated. But the cell changes that HPV can cause in the cervix can be treated.
- HPV that doesn't go away over many years can lead to cervical cancer.

## Other resources on HPV and cervical cancer

### **American Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

1-800-227-2345

### **American Sexual Health Association**

[www.ashastd.org](http://www.ashastd.org)

919-361-8400

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) ([www.cdc.gov/hpv](http://www.cdc.gov/hpv))

1-800-232-4636

### **Foundation for Women's Cancer**

[www.foundationforwomenscancer.org](http://www.foundationforwomenscancer.org)

312-578-1439

### **National Cancer Institute**

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

1-800-422-6237



Here you can find answers to many of the questions women have about cancer of the cervix and the HPV virus.

We also share the American Cancer Society Guidelines for the Early Detection of Cervical Cancer, so starting at age 21, you know what to do to help prevent cervical cancer.

For the latest cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, call the American Cancer Society 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here for you every step of the way.



[cancer.org](http://cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345  
1.866.228.4327 TTY

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