

CERVICAL CANCER: UNDERSTANDING RISK FACTORS AND SCREENING

Cervical cancer starts with the growth of abnormal cells along the cervix. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus and connects the uterus to the vagina. Cancer may form when any abnormal cells grow out of control. Not all of these growths become cancer, and some will go away on their own, but it is important to make sure.

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING?

Many cervical cancers can be prevented or detected early with routine cervical cancer screening. There are two different kinds of tests approved for cervical screening. One option is called the Pap test. This test collects cells from the cervix. Those cells can be looked at in a lab to determine if cancer or pre-cancerous cells are present. The second test is called the HPV test and can be done by itself or with the Pap test. The HPV tests look for the presence of HPV (human papillomavirus). The presence of HPV may lead to cervical cancer.

WHAT ARE CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING GUIDELINES?

Ages 21-29: Individuals with a cervix should begin Pap tests at the age of 21. If results are normal, your doctor may say to get screened again in three years.

Ages 30-65: Individuals in this age group can talk to their doctor about using the Pap test, HPV test or both. If you use the Pap test, you can wait three years to be screened again if the results are normal. Individuals that use the HPV test may wait five years. If your doctor performs both tests, they may say to wait five years. These guidelines apply for those with normal results, meaning no changes have been found.

Over 65: Your doctor may suggest to not continue with cervical screening at this age if you have had regular screenings with normal results in prior years.



WHAT ARE THE RISK FACTORS OF CERVICAL CANCER?

- **HPV (human papillomavirus):** HPV infection is the most significant risk factor for cervical cancer. HPV is a common sexually transmitted infection, and most people will get HPV at some point. Usually, HPV does not have symptoms, and goes away on its own. Some types of HPV can cause warts. Other types, called high risk types, may put individuals at risk for cervical cancer.
- **Weakened immune system:** Having a weak immune system, or HIV (the virus that cause AIDS), can put individuals at risk for cervical cancer.
- **Smoking:** Smoking cigarettes exposes individuals to cancer-causing chemicals that can put them at higher risk.
- **Birth control pills:** Taking birth control pills for many years may increase risk of cervical cancer. That risk can decrease once taking these pills have stopped.
- **Sexual history:** Having multiple sexual partners or becoming sexually active at a young age may increase a person's risk. This is most likely due to increased exposure to HPV.

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WHAT CAN BE DONE TO LOWER RISK?

Vaccination: The HPV vaccine provides protection against the high-risk types of HPV. The CDC recommends vaccinations for adolescents at age 11 or 12 years old, but can be started as young as 9 years old. Vaccines are recommended at these ages, even though exposure might occur later in life.

Limiting exposure to HPV: This can be done through the practice of safe sex and limiting the number of sexual partners.

Not smoking: There are many benefits to not smoking, including lowering risk of cervical and other cancers.

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS OF CERVICAL CANCER?

Talk to your doctor if you experience any of the following symptoms. Symptoms may not always be related to cervical cancer, but it is important to get screened.

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- An unusual discharge from the vagina
- Pain during sex
- Pain in the pelvic region

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT CERVICAL SCREENING:

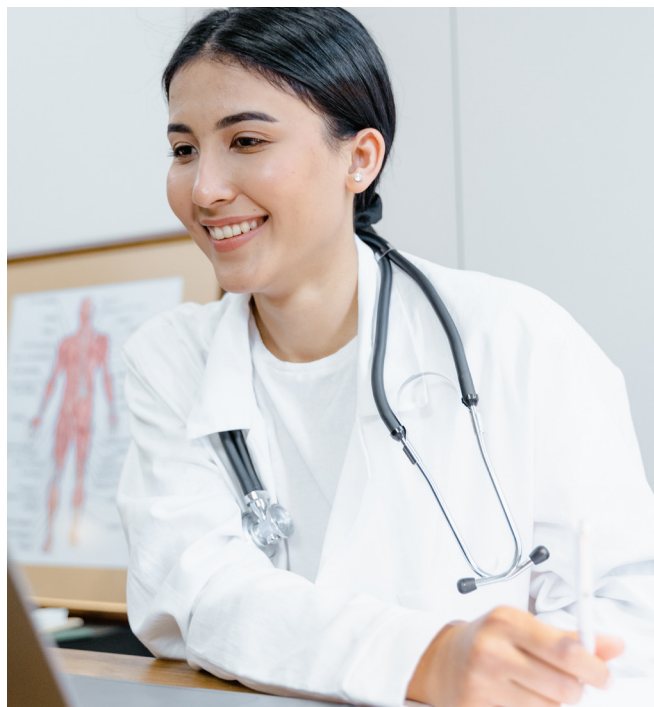
- How can I prepare for cervical screening?
- Which test(s) is right for me now?
- Am I at higher risk for cervical cancer?
- What do I do if testing shows pre-cancerous cells in my cervix?

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Time to Screen

www.timetoscreen.org

National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP)

www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp/screenings.htm

National Cervical Cancer Coalition

www.nccc-online.org

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