

Cervical Cancer Screening



When cancer starts in the cervix, it is called *cervical cancer*. The cervix connects the vagina to the upper part of the *uterus*. The uterus is where a baby grows when a woman is pregnant. All women are at risk for cervical cancer. It occurs most often in women over age 30. Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer.

Causes

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. There are many types of HPV. Some HPV types can cause changes on a woman's cervix that can lead to cervical cancer over time, while other types can cause genital or skin warts.

Other things can increase your risk of cervical cancer:

- Smoking.
- Having HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) or another condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems.
- Using birth control pills for a long time (five or more years).
- Having given birth to three or more children.
- Having several sexual partners.

Symptoms

Early on, cervical cancer may not cause signs and symptoms. Advanced cervical cancer may cause bleeding or discharge from the vagina that is not normal for you, such as bleeding after sex.

If you have any of these signs, see your doctor. They may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to see your doctor.

Screening

Two screening tests can help prevent cervical cancer or find it early:

- The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for precancers, cell changes on the cervix that might become cervical cancer if they are not treated appropriately.
- The HPV test looks for the virus (human papillomavirus) that can cause these cell changes.

Both tests can be done in a doctor's office or clinic. During the Pap test, the doctor will use a plastic or metal instrument, called a speculum, to widen your vagina. This helps the doctor examine the vagina and the cervix and collect a few cells and mucus from the cervix and the area around it. The cells are sent to a laboratory.

- If you are getting a Pap test, the cells will be checked to see if they look normal.
- If you are getting an HPV test, the cells will be tested for HPV.