

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is the easiest female cancer to prevent, with regular screening tests and follow-up. Two tests can help prevent cervical cancer or find it early –

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

Screening is looking for cancer before a person has any symptoms. This can help find cancer at an early stage. When abnormal tissue or cancer is found early, it may be easier to treat. By the time symptoms appear, cancer may have begun to spread.

It is important to remember that your doctor does not necessarily think you have cancer if he or she suggests a screening test. Screening tests are given when you have no cancer symptoms.

When to be Screened

Cervical dysplasia occurs more often in women who are in their 20's and 30's . In the 1970's, cervical cancer rates went down by 70 percent because of regular Pap smear screenings. Because of this simple screening test, doctors were able to prevent almost all abnormal Pap smears from becoming cervical cancer. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recently published new recommendations:

- Women should have their first screening Pap smear at age 21 or within 3 years of becoming sexually active.
- Women in their 20's should have a Pap smear every two years.
- Women age 30 and older who have had three normal Pap smears in a row should have a Pap smear every three years.
- Women who have had a hysterectomy should no longer have pap smears if the hysterectomy was for non-cancerous reasons and they don't have a history of severely abnormal pap smears. If you have had a hysterectomy but still have your cervix, you will need to continue routine Pap smears.
- Pap smear screening can be stopped in women 65-70 years old and above who have had three or more normal Pap smears in a row.
- These guidelines should be followed whether you have or have not had the vaccine.

Risk Factors

Several risk factors increase your chance of developing cervical cancer. Women without any of these risk factors rarely develop cervical cancer. Although these risk factors increase the odds of developing cervical cancer, many women with these risks do not develop this disease. Cervical cancer risk factors include: Having a Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, smoking, past or current Chlamydia infection, poor diet, long term use of oral contraceptives (birth control pills), women who have had 3 or more full-term pregnancies, young age at the first full-term pregnancy, family history of cervical cancer (mother or sister), poverty, immunosuppression (HIV or AIDS), or Diethylstilbestrol (DES) exposure in utero.

Screening

A pap test is a procedure to collect cells from the surface of the cervix and vagina. A two brush system or a small plastic spatula is used to gently scrape cells from the cervix and vagina. The cells are viewed under a microscope to find out if they are abnormal. This procedure is called a Pap smear. If you are getting the HPV test in addition to the Pap test, the cells collected during the Pap test will be tested for HPV at the laboratory. Talk with your doctor, nurse or other health care professional about whether the HPV test is right for you.

If you have a low income, or do not have health insurance, you may be able to get a free or low-cost Pap test through the national Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. To find out if you qualify, call their California help line at 1 (800) 511-2300 or 1 (800) CDC-INFO.