

January 2015 • Members

# Cervical Cancer Screening

## What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer of the lower part of the uterus or womb. This lower part is called the cervix. Cancer of the cervix is caused by certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a common virus spread during sex. But most HPV infections clear up on their own, especially in women <30 years of age. The infections that don't go away can cause cervical cancer in some women.

## Why screening for cervical cancer is important

Screening is important for 2 reasons. The first reason is that screening tests can detect cancer when it's in the early stage. This is before symptoms show up. And this is when cancer treatment is more successful. In fact, 91% of women whose cervical cancer is caught early survive for at least 5 years.<sup>1</sup> But only 16% survive for at least 5 years when it is caught late.<sup>1</sup>

Second, screening might keep you from getting the cancer. Screening can detect HPV. Screening can also find changes in your cells that occur before cancer actually develops. If either of these is detected, steps can be taken to increase the chance that you will not get the cancer.

Screening has helped to decrease the number of deaths from cervical cancer. It used to be the number 1 cause of cancer deaths in women in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Now it's number 14.<sup>1</sup> But not all women get screened regularly, and it shows. About half of all cervical cancers occur in women who have never been screened.<sup>3</sup> Another 10% occur in women who haven't been screened in the last 5 years.<sup>3</sup> So that means 60% occur in women who weren't properly screened.

## Tests for cervical cancer screening

Two tests are used for cervical cancer screening. The Pap test looks at cervical cells for changes that might lead to cancer. If such changes are present, a woman is said to have precancer. The Pap test can also detect changes that mean cancer is present. The second test detects the HPV infection that can cause the cancer.

These 2 tests aren't used for every woman. The tests used depend on a woman's age.



## Cervical cancer risk factors

Some factors can increase your risk of cervical cancer. These include:

- High-risk HPV infection
- Past or present sexually transmitted infection (chlamydia)
- Smoking
- Poor diet
- Being overweight
- Long-term use of birth-control pills
- Never having used an intra-uterine birth control device
- Reduced immunity (eg, because of HIV infection)
- Giving birth to your first child at a young age (<17 years)
- Giving birth to 3 or more children
- Being 35-55 years old
- Being Hispanic or African American
- Having cervical cancer in your family

Remember to get screened even if you don't think you have any risk factors. HPV infection usually doesn't cause symptoms. Getting screened may be the only way to find out you have an HPV infection and are at greater risk of cervical cancer.

### Cervical cancer screening guidelines

Age, years	Recommended Screening <sup>3</sup>
<21	No screening
21 to 29	Pap test every 3 years
30 to 65	Pap test + HPV co-testing every 5 years (preferred) <b>or</b> Pap test every 3 years
>65	No screening (if low cancer risk)

HPV infection is common among teens. But about 90% of these infections go away on their own.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the risk for cervical cancer is very low. That's why the guidelines don't recommend screening teens and young adults.

HPV infections are also common in women 21 to 29 years of age. But for some reason, their risk for cervical cancer is a little higher. So the guidelines recommend a Pap test every 3 years starting at 21 years of age.<sup>3</sup>

### Co-testing—the preferred option for women 30 to 65 years old

Women 30 to 65 years of age are at the highest risk for cervical cancer. The preferred screen for them is a Pap test *plus* an HPV test.<sup>3</sup> This is called co-testing. Co-testing screens for both the virus that causes the cancer and the presence of abnormal cells. Co-testing is preferred to a Pap test alone because<sup>3</sup>:

- It detects precancer better than either test alone.
- It is better at detecting some types of cervical cancer.
- It allows for less frequent screening.

### Cervical cancer screening covered at 100%

Current law says that preventive healthcare services should be paid by the insurance company. This means that most women who have health insurance won't have to pay for cervical cancer screening. The same is true for an annual check-up with your doctor.

### The annual well woman visit is important

An annual check-up with your doctor is an important part of your medical care. Your doctor can assess your overall health. This can help uncover any health problems early on. This is also an excellent time to talk to your doctor about your health concerns. Services that you can receive include:

- Height, weight, temperature, blood pressure check
- Physical exam (heart, lungs, breast, abdomen, pelvis, skin)
- Vaccinations (eg, annual flu shot)
- Screen for heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer, etc.
- Counseling about healthy lifestyle habits, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy prevention, etc.

### Additional Information

For more information, visit these Web sites:

- American Cancer Society: [cancer.org/cancer/cervicalcancer/](http://cancer.org/cancer/cervicalcancer/)
- MedicineNet.com: [medicinenet.com/cervical\\_cancer/article.htm](http://medicinenet.com/cervical_cancer/article.htm)
- WebMD®: [webmd.com/cancer/cervical-cancer/cervical-cancer-topic-overview](http://webmd.com/cancer/cervical-cancer/cervical-cancer-topic-overview)
- MedlinePlus: [nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cervicalcancer.html](http://nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cervicalcancer.html)

### References

1. Cancer Facts and Figures 2014. American Cancer Society Web site. [cancer.org/research/cancerfactsstatistics/cancerfactsfigures2014/](http://cancer.org/research/cancerfactsstatistics/cancerfactsfigures2014/). Accessed November 4, 2014.
2. Cervical cancer statistics. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Gynecological Cancers Web site. [cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/statistics/](http://cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/statistics/). Updated September 2, 2014. Accessed November 11, 2014.
3. Massad LS, Einstein MH, Huh WK, et al. 2012 updated consensus guidelines for the management of abnormal cervical cancer screening tests and cancer precursors. *Obstet Gynecol.* 2013;12:829-846.
4. Rodríguez AC, Schiffman M, Herrero R, et al. Rapid clearance of human papillomavirus and implications for clinical focus on persistent infections. *J Natl Cancer Inst.* 2008;100:513-517.
5. Women's preventive services guidelines. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Health Resources and Services Administration. [hrsa.gov/womensguidelines/](http://hrsa.gov/womensguidelines/). Accessed November 4, 2014.