

Spotlight on Health

Cervical Cancer Screening Co-testing

Screening for cervical cancer has been used to save lives for many years. Screening was first done using only the Pap test. For decades, this was the gold standard test for screening. Then scientists learned that a virus causes almost all cervical cancers. This virus is called the human papillomavirus (HPV). After this discovery, doctors started to use an HPV test for screening too. When an HPV test is used with a Pap test, doctors call it a co-test. This newsletter will help you learn more about co-testing and cervical cancer screening and prevention.

Co-testing

Co-testing is a cervical cancer screening test that includes an HPV test and a Pap test. The HPV test detects the virus that can cause cervical cancer. The Pap test detects the presence of abnormal cells. These abnormal cells indicate that cancer is either present or might develop.

If both tests are negative, screening doesn't have to be done again until 5 years later¹. If one or both of the tests are positive, there are a couple of options^{1,2}:

- Repeat the co-test in 1 or 3 years
- Do follow-up testing right away to learn more

Co-testing and the Cervical Cancer Screening Guidelines

Co-testing is not recommended for teens and young adults.^{1,3} In fact, screening is not needed at all for girls and women <21 years old. About 90% of HPV infections in this group go away by themselves.⁴ Thus, the risk for cervical cancer is very low.

Co-testing is not recommended for women 21 to 29 years of age either.^{1,3} This is because most HPV infections in this age group still go away by themselves. But the risk for cancer is a little higher than in those <21. So for women 21 to 29 years old, screening with a Pap test alone is recommended.^{1,3}

Co-testing is recommended for women 30 to 65 years of age. In fact, it's the preferred test.^{1,3} In this age group, fewer HPV infections go away on their own. Thus the risk for cancer is higher. Using both the HPV and the Pap test helps to:

- Detect precancer earlier than Pap testing alone
- Detect some types of cervical cancer that are not detected by the Pap test alone
- Decrease the frequency of screening needed

No screening is needed for women >65 if they have a low cancer risk.



What Is Cervical Cancer and What Causes It?

Cervical cancer is a cancer of the lower part of the uterus (womb). This lower part is called the cervix. The cancer is caused by infection with certain types of HPV. These are called high-risk types. HPV is a common virus spread via skin-to-skin or skin-to-mucous membrane contact. This occurs most often during sex. Consistent and proper use of condoms reduces, but does not always stop, the spread of HPV. Most of the time, HPV infections go away on their own. But when they don't, they can cause changes in cervical cells. In time, the changes lead to cancer in some women.⁴

Cervical Cancer Screening

Doctors use screening to detect the cancer in women who have no signs of it. Treatment at this early stage results in longer survival for most women. Screening can also help stop the cancer from developing. It does this by detecting abnormal cells, which can be removed before they turn into cancer cells.

A positive screen is followed up with other testing to learn more. This helps the doctor decide what treatment, if any, should be done.

Should I Have a Co-test?

Each year during your well-woman exam, your doctor will let you know if you are due for cervical cancer screening. If you are, your doctor will talk to you about which test is best for you. The best test will depend on your age and medical history. Remember, screening doesn't have to be done every year, but a well-woman exam does.

Why Screening for Cervical Cancer Is Important

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.⁵ Now it's number 15.⁶ But not all women get screened regularly, and it shows. About half of all cervical cancers occur in women who have never been screened.² Another 10% occur in women who haven't been screened in the last 5 years.²

How the Laboratory Can Help

The laboratory plays a big role in cervical cancer screening. When you are due to be screened, your doctor will collect the specimen. Then it gets sent to the laboratory for testing. The laboratory can do both the Pap test and the HPV test. If your doctor orders a co-test, both tests will be done. The lab can also do a follow-up HPV test. This test can tell you if you have one of the 2 types of HPV most likely to cause cancer. This follow-up test is called an HPV genotype test.

What You Can Do

Regular screening should be part of your personal healthcare. Talk with your doctor about what kind of cervical cancer screening is best for you.

And don't forget that an annual check-up is an important part of your healthcare. It gives your doctor a chance to check your overall health. This can help uncover any health problems early on.

If you are 26 years of age or younger, getting an HPV vaccine is another step you can take. It lowers your risk of cervical cancer.

HPV Vaccines

There are currently 3 vaccines that help protect against HPV infection. They protect against the HPV types that are most likely to cause cancer. Two of them also protect against HPV types that cause genital warts. To be most effective, a person needs 3 shots over a 6-month period.

The vaccine can be given to girls or women 11 through 26 years of age. Two of the vaccines can also be given to boys or men 9 through 26 years of age. Experts prefer girls and boys to get vaccinated when they are 11 to 12 years old.

Screening Is Covered by Health Plans

Under the Affordable Care Act, cervical cancer screening must be covered by health plans. So if you have health insurance, you can't be charged a copay.

References

1. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Practice Bulletin No. 157: Cervical Cancer Screening and Prevention. *Obstet Gynecol*. 2016;127(1):e1-e20.
2. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Practice Bulletin No. 140: management of abnormal cervical cancer screening test results and cervical cancer precursors. *Obstet Gynecol*. 2013;122:1338-1367.
3. Saslow D, Solomon D, Lawson HW, et al. American Cancer Society, American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology, and American Society for Clinical Pathology screening guidelines for the prevention and early detection of cervical cancer. *CA Cancer J Clin*. 2012;62:147-172.
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. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cervical cancer statistics. www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/statistics/. Updated August 20, 2015. Accessed January 14, 2016.
6. American Cancer Society. Cancer facts and figures 2015. www.cancer.org/acs/groups/content/@editorial/documents/document/acspc-044552.pdf. Accessed January 14, 2016.