

Cervical Cancer: The Preventable Gynecologic Cancer

Most cases of cervical cancer are easily preventable with regular screening tests and follow-up. It also is highly curable when found and treated early. Now vaccines are available to protect against the most common cause of cervical cancer.

The main cause of cervical cancer is human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. Most of the time, HPV goes away by itself and does not cause health problems. If the body does not clear the virus, it stays in the body for many years before it causes cancer.

Screening Tests

When used together, two tests can help find cervical cancer early—

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

The Pap test is recommended for women between the ages of 21 and 65.

Women should start getting Pap tests at age 21. If your Pap test results are normal, your doctor may tell you that you can wait three years until your next Pap test.

If you are 30 years old or older, you may choose to have an HPV test along with the Pap test. Both tests can be performed by your doctor at the same time. If your test results are normal, your doctor may tell you that you can wait five years for your next screening.

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 CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. Find out if you qualify.

HPV Vaccines

HPV vaccines protect against the types of HPV that most commonly cause cervical cancer. CDC recommends that all girls and boys who are 11 or 12 years old get three doses (shots) of HPV vaccine.

HPV vaccines are recommended for all teen girls and women through age 26, who did not get all three doses of the vaccine when they were younger. HPV vaccines are recommended for all teen boys and men through age 21, who did not get all three doses of the vaccine when they were younger. The vaccine also is recommended for gay and bisexual men (or any man who has sex with men) and men with compromised immune systems (including HIV) through age 26, if they did not get fully vaccinated when they were younger. All men may get the vaccine through age 26, and should ask their doctor if getting vaccinated is right for them.

If you don't have insurance, or if it does not cover vaccines, the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program may be able to help.

Disclaimer: This document is for informational purposes only and is not intended to take the place of the care and attention of your personal physician or other professional medical services. Talk with your doctor if you have Questions about individual health concerns or specific treatment options.

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