



CERVICAL CANCER



What is cervical cancer?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. Cancer is always named for the part of the body where it starts, even if it spreads to other body parts later.

When cancer starts in the cervix, it is called cervical cancer. The cervix is the lower, narrow end of the uterus. The cervix connects the vagina (the birth canal) to the upper part of the uterus. The uterus (or womb) is where a baby grows when a woman is pregnant.

Cervical cancer is the easiest gynecologic cancer to prevent with regular screening tests and follow-up. It also is highly curable when found and treated early.

Who gets cervical cancer?

All women are at risk for cervical cancer. It occurs most often in women over age 30. Each year, approximately 12,000 women in the United States get cervical cancer.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer. HPV is a common virus that is passed from one person to another during sex. Most sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives, but few women will get cervical cancer.

What are the 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.

What raises a woman's chance of getting cervical cancer?

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV. You are more likely to get HPV if you started having sex at an early age, or if you or your partner have had sex with several others. However, any woman who has ever had sex is at risk for HPV.

There are many types of HPV. Usually HPV will go away on its own, but if it does not, it may cause cervical cancer over time.

In addition to having HPV, these things also 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.

How can I prevent cervical cancer?

- See your doctor regularly for a Pap and/or HPV test.
- Follow up with your doctor if your cervical cancer screening test results are not normal.
- Get the HPV vaccine. It protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. It is recommended for preteens (both boys and girls) aged 11 to 12 years, but can be given as early as age 9 and until age 26. The vaccine is given in a series of either two or three shots, depending on age. It is important to note that even

women who are vaccinated against HPV need to have regular Pap tests to screen for cervical cancer. To learn more about the HPV vaccine visit www.cdc.gov/hpv.

- Don't smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.*
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

* HPV infection can occur in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, as well as in areas that are not covered. While the effect of condoms in preventing HPV infection is unknown, condom use has been associated with a lower rate of cervical cancer.

What should I do if my doctor says I have cervical cancer?

If your doctor says that you have cervical cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist—a doctor who has been trained to treat cancers like this. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.

Where can I find free or low-cost cervical cancer screening tests?

If you have a low income or do not have insurance, you may be able to get a free or low-cost cervical cancer screening test through the Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. To learn more, call 1-877-252-3324 or visit www.alabamapublichealth.gov/bandc

Where can I find more information about cervical and other gynecologic cancers?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/cancer/gynecologic

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