

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer was once a leading cause of death in women, but the use of Pap smears for screening has resulted in the early detection of the disease and, as a result, has markedly improved the survival rate.

Over half of the cervical cancers diagnosed in the U.S. are in women who have never been screened or have not been screened in the last 5 years. Cervical cancer in older women occurs almost entirely in women who have not been screened.

What Are the Risk Factors?



Human Papillomavirus. The most common risk factor is human papillomavirus infection (HPV). HPV is a virus infection of the genitals that is common when a woman has multiple sexual partners. This infection increases the risk of a woman getting cervical cancer.

Smoking. Smoking also causes a small increase in risk.

Race. Vietnamese women have much higher rates of cervical cancer, and Hispanic women have higher rates than women of Caucasian or African-American background.

Medical History. A history of cervical cancer, exposure to diethylstilbestrol (DES) before birth, or an immune system disease (like HIV/AIDS) also raises the risk.

These risk factors can lead to later development of abnormal cells that become cancer. If you are not sure if one of these risk factors applies to you, your doctor can tell you if you are in any of the high-risk categories.

What Are the Current Screening Recommendations?

Current recommendations from respected authorities are:

- Regular screening (at least every 3 years) in all sexually active women. Some experts recommend that screening be done in all women in good health.
- If you have had a hysterectomy for reasons other than cervical cancer, you do not need Pap smears.
- Since the risk of cervical cancer decreases with age, most experts agree that screening can be discontinued by age 65 to 70 in women who have had:
 - Three negative Pap smears in the past 10 years
 - No additional risk factors, such as a history of cervical cancer, exposure to DES, or HPV infection
- If you are at increased risk, continuing screening later in life is recommended unless you have a life-limiting illness.

How Do I Decide?

Age is an important factor in your decision for two reasons.

- First, the incidence of new pre-cancers is less likely after menopause.
- Second, the pre-cancers usually found with the Pap smear take many years to become cancers, so the older you are, the less likely this cancer will develop in your lifetime.

However, not all experts agree on when women can safely discontinue Pap smears. Some think women over 65 who are in good health should continue having Pap smears. A few cancers can still occur in older women, and finding them early improves the chance of cure.

If you are not sure what you want to do, your doctor can help you understand how your risk factors, age, and health might influence your decision.

Resources

Organization

American Cancer Society

Phone: (800) ACS-2345 (227-2345)

TTY: (866) 228-4327

Web site: www.cancer.org

Cancer Information Specialists are available 24 hours a day to answer your questions in English or Spanish.

National Cancer Institute —

The Cancer Information Service (CIS)

Phone: (800) 4-CANCER (422-6237)

TTY: (800) 332-8615

Web site: www.cancer.gov

Live web chat line: www.cancer.gov/help

Up-to-date information about cancer. Specialists answer questions in English or Spanish.

Web Site

www.medlineplus.gov

Up-to-date, quality health care information. Go to Health Topics, "Cervical Cancer."