

# Cervical cancer awareness

**J**anuary is Cervical Health Awareness Month, and CHCNEO wants you to know that there's a lot you can do to prevent cervical cancer.

The following information was taken from a fact sheet about cervical cancer and is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Inside Knowledge. A link to this information can be found on our website [www.chcneo.com](http://www.chcneo.com).

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.

Are there tests that can prevent cervical cancer or find it early?

There are two tests that can either help prevent cervical cancer or find it early:

- The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for precancers, cell changes, on the cervix that can be treated, so that cervical cancer is prevented. The Pap test also can find cervical cancer early, when treatment is most effective. The Pap test is recommended for women aged 21-65 years old. The Pap test only screens for cervical cancer. It does not screen for any other gynecologic cancer.
- The HPV test looks for HPV—the virus that can cause precancerous cell changes and cervical cancer. When should I get tested for cervical cancer?

The Pap test is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available. You should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21. If your Pap test results are normal, your doctor may say that you will not need another Pap test for three years. The HPV test can be used to screen for cervical cancer along with the Pap test in women aged 30 years and older. It also is used to provide more information when women aged 21 years and older have unclear Pap test results. If you are age 30 or older, you may choose to have an HPV test along with the Pap test. If the results are normal, your chance of getting cervical cancer in the next few years is very low. Your doctor may then say that you can wait up to five years for your next screening. For women aged 21-65, it is important to continue getting a Pap test as directed by your doctor—even if you think you are too old to have a

child or are not having sex anymore.

However, your doctor may tell you that you do not need to have a Pap test if either of these is true for you:

- You are older than 65 and have had normal Pap test results for several years.
- You have had your cervix removed as part of a total hysterectomy for non-cancerous conditions, like fibroids.

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 test that can find cervical precancers.

• Follow up with your doctor, if your Pap 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. At CHCNEO our



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vaccinations are available through the Vaccines for Children (VFC) program and are available to those 18 and younger. It is important to note that even women who are vaccinated against HPV need to have regular Pap tests to screen for cervical cancer.

- Don't smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.

• Limit your number of sexual partners.

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 Pap tests?

If you have a low income or do not have insurance, you may be able to get a free or low-cost Pap test through the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. To learn more, call 800-CDC-INFO or visit [www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp).

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

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention: 800-CDC-INFO or [www.cdc.gov/cancer/gynecologic](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/gynecologic)  
National Cancer Institute: 800-4-CANCER or [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

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