

Preventing Cervical Cancer



- Cervical cancer is the 4th most common cancer among women globally, with an estimated 604,000 new cases and 342,000 deaths in 2020.
- Cervical cancer starts in the cells lining the cervix—the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina.
- The goal of cervical cancer screening is to find pre-cancer or cancer early when it is more treatable and curable. Regular screening can prevent cervical cancers and save lives.
- Normal cells of the cervix first gradually develop abnormal changes that are called pre-cancerous. In some women, pre-cancers turn into invasive cancers. Treating cervical pre-cancers can prevent almost all cervical cancers.
- The tests for cervical cancer screening are the Pap test and HPV test. Pre-cancerous changes can be detected by the Pap test and treated to prevent cancer from developing. The HPV test looks for infection by high-risk types of HPV that are more likely to cause pre-cancers and cancers of the cervix.
- Almost all cervical cancers are caused by human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex or other skin-to-skin contact.
- HPV is so common that most people get it at some point in their lives. HPV usually causes no symptoms, so you can't tell that you have it. For most women, HPV will go away on its own; however, if it does not, there is a chance that over time it may cause cervical cancer.
- Factors that can increase your risk of cervical cancer include having HIV or a weakened immune system, smoking, using birth control pills for 5+ years, having given birth to 3+ children, having several sexual partners, and exposure in utero to the miscarriage drug diethylstilbestrol (DES).
- The USPSTF recommends screening for cervical cancer in all women beginning at age 21 and repeating screening every 3-5 years based on individual risk.
- For both a Pap test and HPV test, a health professional uses a special tool to gently scrape or brush the cervix to remove cells for testing. If a pre-cancer is found, it can be treated, keeping it from turning into cervical cancer.
- For children and young adults, HPV vaccination is recommended to prevent infection and protect against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers.
- Currently available vaccines are intended to produce immunity to HPV types that cause about 90% of cervical cancers as well as some HPV types that can cause anal and genital warts.
- Talk to your healthcare provider to learn more about how to lower your risk and prevent cervical cancer.