

# Cervical Cancer

The good news about cervical cancer is that, with regular screenings and pap tests, it is one of the most preventable gynecologic cancers. And, with the new vaccine, there is even more opportunity to prevent the disease. First, however, it's important to understand it.

## Risk

Cervical cancer is a slow-growing cancer originating with abnormal cells found on the cervix. Over time, these abnormal cells can transform into cancer cells that grow and spread deep into the cervix. Most cases of cervical cancer are linked to the sexually transmitted disease - HPV (Human Papilloma Virus).

Any woman who is sexually active is at risk for cervical cancer because of HPV. This virus has over 100 different strains that effect different areas of the body. Thirteen of these strains correlate to a high risk of cervical cancer.

## Symptoms

One of the more frightening things about cervical cancer is there are no signs or symptoms to warn you of its presence. Only after the cancer has formed and has invaded the surrounding areas do symptoms usually occur. They may include vaginal discharge, bleeding, odor and pain. Since these are common symptoms for other conditions, it is important to consult a doctor immediately if you experience anything out of the ordinary.

## Diagnosis/Screening

Each year women should have a routine pelvic exam and a pap test to screen for cervical cancer. The pap test (also known as a pap smear) is a key component in preventing the disease. In a pap test, your doctor collects cells from the cervix and has those cells examined to see if any are abnormal. If the results come back indicating abnormalities,



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your doctor may request an HPV DNA pap test to see if the abnormal cells are a result of an HPV infection.

Your doctor may also perform a colposcopy to find the cause of the abnormal results. In this procedure, your doctor administers a fluid into the vagina to target and highlight abnormal cells. If abnormal cells are present, your doctor will usually perform a biopsy and have the tissue tested for cancer cells. The colposcopy is very important in the prevention of cervical cancer because it can detect it at a very early stage.

## Treatment

How cervical cancer is treated depends on the stage of the cancer, meaning its size, depth, and growth. Treatment can vary from surgical procedures, radiation treatments, and chemotherapy, and sometimes a combination of all three. Your doctor will choose a procedure based on whether the cancer is preinvasive (the malignant cells have not yet spread to other parts of the body) or invasive (the



cancer cells have penetrated and are beginning to spread).

If your doctor recommends surgery, there may be several different approaches, depending on the stage of the cancer.

Preinvasive cancer procedures could include:

- Cryosurgery: a procedure to freeze abnormal cells with liquid nitrogen
- Laser surgery: a procedure used to laser/burn off abnormal cells
- Conization (or cone biopsy): a procedure used to remove a cone-shaped piece of the cervix. Although sometimes used alone, most of the time conization is used for further testing before administering other treatments

Invasive cancer procedures could include:

- Simple Hysterectomy: a procedure used to remove the uterus (could also include removal of ovaries and fallopian tubes if necessary or only in older females)
- Radical Hysterectomy: a procedure used to remove the entire uterus, surrounding tissues and lymph nodes

Radiation uses powerful x-rays to kill cancer cells. It is used on its own or in conjunction with other treatments, including surgery, to treat the cancer.

Chemotherapy is a treatment that places anti-cancer drugs into the body intravenously or through a pill. The drug spreads through the body to kill spreading cancer cells in areas such as the lymph nodes or other organs. Like radiation, this approach can be used on its own or in combination with other treatments, including radiation or surgery.

## Prevention

The important thing to keep in mind is that in many cases cervical cancer is preventable. With pap smears, doctors are able to catch abnormal cells very early before they even have the chance to turn into cancer cells.

In 2006, the FDA approved a new vaccine to prevent infection from the four major types of HPV. Because getting the vaccine is recommended before being sexually active, it has been approved for females between nine and 26 years of age. For FAQs on the vaccine, visit <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/risk/HPV-vaccine>.

For more information on cervical cancer or HPV, visit [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov).

For more information about Nationwide Better Health visit: [www.nwbetterhealth.com](http://www.nwbetterhealth.com) Or contact your benefits representative.



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