



CERVICAL CANCER

THE CERVIX

The cervix is part of a woman's reproductive system. It's in the pelvis. The cervix is the lower, narrow part of the uterus (womb).

The cervix is a passageway:

- The cervix connects the uterus to the vagina. During a menstrual period, blood flows from the uterus through the cervix into the vagina. The vagina leads to the outside of the body.
- The cervix makes mucus. During sex, mucus helps sperm move from the vagina through the cervix into the uterus.
- During pregnancy, the cervix is tightly closed to help keep the baby inside the uterus. During childbirth, the cervix opens to allow the baby to pass through the vagina.

“Cervical Cancer is more common among women who don't have regular pap tests.”

RISK FACTORS

When you get a diagnosis of cancer, it's natural to wonder what may have caused the disease. Doctors cannot always explain why one woman develops cervical cancer and another does not. However, we do know that a woman with certain risk factors may be more likely than others to develop cervical cancer. A risk factor is something that may increase the chance of developing a disease.

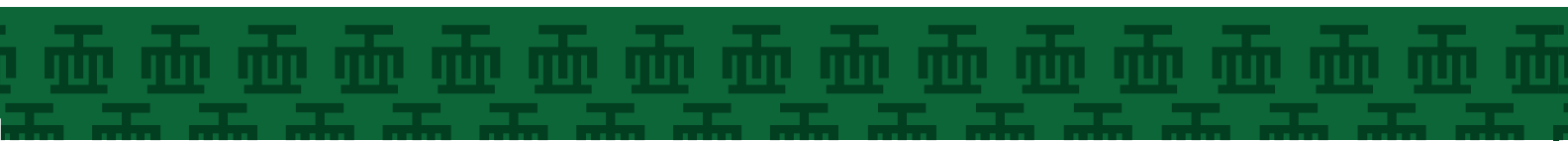
Studies have found a number of factors that may increase the risk of cervical cancer. For example, infection with HPV (human papillomavirus) is the main cause of cervical cancer. HPV infection and other risk factors may act together to increase the risk even more:

- **HPV infection:** HPV is a group of viruses that can infect the cervix. An HPV infection that doesn't go away can cause cervical cancer in some women. HPV is the cause of nearly all cervical cancers. HPV infections are very common. These viruses are passed from person to person through sexual contact. Most adults have been infected with HPV at some time in their lives, but most infections clear up on their own.

Some types of HPV can cause changes to cells in the cervix. If these changes are found early, cervical cancer can be prevented by removing or killing the changed cells before they can become cancer cells.

A vaccine for females ages 9 to 26 protects against two types of HPV infection that cause cervical cancer.

- **Lack of regular Pap tests:** Cervical cancer is more common among women who don't have regular Pap tests. The Pap test helps doctors find abnormal cells. Removing or killing the abnormal cells usually prevents cervical cancer.
- **Smoking:** Among women who are infected with HPV, smoking cigarettes slightly increases the risk of cervical cancer.
- **Weakened immune system (the body's natural defense system):** Infection with HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) or taking drugs that suppress the immune system increases the risk of cervical cancer.
- **Sexual history:** Women who have had many sexual partners have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. Also, a woman who has had sex with a man who has had many sexual partners may be at higher risk of developing cervical cancer. In both cases, the risk of developing cervical cancer is higher because these women have a higher risk of HPV infection.





- **Using birth control pills for a long time:** Using birth control pills for a long time (5 or more years) may slightly increase the risk of cervical cancer among women with HPV infection. However, the risk decreases quickly when women stop using birth control pills.
- **Having many children:** Studies suggest that giving birth to many children (5 or more) may slightly increase the risk of cervical cancer among women with HPV infection.
- **DES (diethylstilbestrol):** DES may increase the risk of a rare form of cervical cancer in daughters exposed to this drug before birth (It is no longer given to pregnant women.)

Having an HPV infection or other risk factors does not mean that a woman will develop cervical cancer. Most women who have risk factors for cervical cancer never develop it.

SYMPTOMS

Early cervical cancers usually don't cause symptoms. When the cancer grows larger, women may notice one or more of these symptoms:

1. Abnormal vaginal bleeding
 - Bleeding that occurs between regular menstrual periods
 - Bleeding after sexual intercourse, douching, or a pelvic exam
 - Menstrual periods that last longer and are heavier than before
 - Bleeding after going through menopause
2. Increased vaginal discharge
 - Pelvic pain
 - Pain during sex

Infections or other health problems may also cause these symptoms. Only a doctor can tell for sure. A woman with any of these symptoms should tell her doctor so that problems can be diagnosed and treated as early as possible.

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