



JANUARY 2025



Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer arises from the cells of the cervix, the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. It is mostly caused by persistent infection with certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted virus. While many women will be exposed to HPV in their lifetimes, only a small number will develop cervical cancer. Other contributing factors may include smoking, a weakened immune system, long-term use of oral contraceptives, and having multiple pregnancies. Early detection and preventive measures can significantly alter the disease's outcome.

Risk Factors

A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of getting a disease such as cancer.

Several risk factors can increase your chance of developing cervical cancer. People without any of these risk factors rarely develop cervical cancer. Although these risk factors can increase the odds of developing cervical cancer, many with these risks do not create this disease.

When considering risk factors, it helps to focus on those you can change or avoid (like smoking or human papilloma virus infection) rather than those you cannot (such as your age and family history).

Risk factors you can change

- Infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV) is the primary risk factor for cervical cancer, as HPV comprises over 150 related viruses, some of which cause warts. Sexual history significantly influences the risk, primarily by increasing exposure to HPV.
- Smoking also elevates the risk; women who smoke are about twice as likely to develop cervical cancer compared to non-smokers due to the harmful chemicals absorbed into the bloodstream.
- Additionally, infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) compromises the immune system, increasing susceptibility to HPV.
- Research indicates that women with a history of chlamydia infections may have a higher risk of cervical cancer, potentially due to chlamydia facilitating the persistence of HPV in the cervix.

Risk factors that cannot be changed

Diethylstilbestrol (DES) Exposure

- A hormonal drug was prescribed from 1938 to 1971 to prevent miscarriages.
- Daughters of women who took DES during pregnancy are at increased risk of developing clear-cell adenocarcinoma, particularly of the vagina or cervix.

Family History of Cervical Cancer

- Cervical cancer can have a hereditary component.
- Women with a mother or sister who had cervical cancer have a higher risk of developing the disease compared to those without such a family history.

Things to do to prevent pre-cancers and cancers

To reduce the risk of cervical cancer and pre-cancers, consider the following strategies based on age, health, and personal risk:

Get an HPV Vaccine

- The HPV vaccine is highly effective in preventing cervical cancer by protecting against high-risk HPV strains, especially types 16 and 18.
- It is recommended for preteens (ages 11-12) but can be given to individuals up to 26 years old.
- Increasing vaccination rates can significantly lower HPV infections and cervical cancer incidence.

Regular Screening

- Regular Pap smears and HPV testing are crucial for early detection.
- Start screenings at age 21, with Pap smears every three years until age 29.
- From ages 30 to 65, consider a combination of Pap and HPV testing every five years or continue Pap smears every three years.
- Early identification of cervical changes allows for timely intervention.

Healthy Lifestyle Choices

- Practice the faithfulness in your marriage to reduce HPV risk.
- Avoid tobacco, as smoking increases cervical cancer risk.
- Maintain a healthy diet rich in fruits and vegetables, engage in regular physical activity, and manage stress to strengthen the immune system and combat infections like HPV.