

Cervical Cancer Screening

When cancer starts in the cervix, it is called cervical cancer. The cervix links the vagina to the upper part of the uterus. The uterus is where a baby grows when a woman is pregnant. All women are at risk for cancer. It occurs most often in women over age 30.

Causes

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV). It is a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. There are many types of HPV. Some types can cause changes on a woman's cervix that can lead to cancer over time. Other types can cause genital or skin warts.

Other things can increase your risk of cervical cancer:

- Smoking.
- Having HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) or another illness 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.
- Having many sexual partners.

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.

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.

Screening

Two tests can help prevent cervical cancer or find it early:

- • The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for precancers, cell changes on the cervix that might become cancer.
- • The HPV test looks for the human papillomavirus that can cause these cell changes.

Both tests can be done in a doctor's office or clinic. During the Pap test, the doctor will use a plastic or metal tool, called a speculum, to widen your vagina. This helps the doctor examine and collect a few cells and mucus from the cervix and the area around it. The cells are sent to a laboratory.

- If you are getting a Pap test, the cells will be checked to see if they look normal.
- If you are getting an HPV test, the cells will be tested for HPV.