

Cervical Cancer: Introduction



We've all heard of cancer at some point in our lives—cancer screenings, cancer care, and maybe even cancer treatment. But what is cancer? And what steps can you take to prevent it?

Cancer is a disease that begins when some cells in your body grow out of control. All cells grow and divide. But cancer cells grow even though your body doesn't need them. And sometimes cancer cells spread all over the body. This is called metastasis.

There is no one symptom of cancer. In fact, it can have many different symptoms. This depends on the type of cancer it is and where it is in your body. But luckily, there are many ways to find cancer early and treat it.

Understanding the cervix

The cervix is the lower, narrow part of the uterus. It connects the uterus to the vagina. The cervix tightens and loosens to let fluids pass between the uterus and vagina. It's also important to menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth.

Looking for precancer

When cancer starts in cervical cells, it is called cervical cancer. If you are younger than age 50, you may be at a higher risk. But, there are tests that can screen for signs of cervical cancer before it develops. For instance, the Pap test checks to see if the cells in your cervix are growing normally.

When you get a Pap test, a small brush is used to gently remove some cells from your cervix. Medical professionals use a microscope to look at these cells to see if they are growing correctly. If they find cells that look different from other cells, your healthcare provider will let you know. They may call these cells atypical or dysplasia (precancer). This means they are cells that could become cancer. Your provider can also advise ways to make sure these cells do not turn into cancer.

Types of precancer

A Pap test can help find precancer cells. There are several types of precancer, including:

- Squamous intraepithelial lesion (SIL)
- Dysplasia
- Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN)

SIL is divided into 2 types:

- **Low-grade SIL.** This refers to early changes in the size, shape, and number of cells on the surface of the cervix. The changes may go away on their own. Or they may grow larger or become more abnormal over time. Your provider may call these changes mild dysplasia or CIN 1.
- **High-grade SIL.** This means there are many changed cells that are precancer cells. These changes only happen in cells on the surface of the cervix. It can take a long time for these cells to become cancer. But without treatment, they will become cancer. High-grade SIL may also be called moderate or severe dysplasia, CIN 2 or 3, or carcinoma in situ.

It's important to find and treat abnormal cells on the surface of the cervix as soon as possible. Otherwise, they can spread deeper into the cervix or to other areas of the body. When this happens, it is called cervical cancer, or invasive cervical cancer.

Preventing cervical cancer

There are 2 ways to prevent cervical cancer:

- **Get regular Pap tests.** These tests find and treat precancer cells as soon as possible, before they can change into cancer.
- **Put a stop to precancer cells.** You can do this by preventing infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV), getting an HPV vaccine, and not smoking.

Talk with your healthcare provider

If you have questions about cervical cancer, cervical cancer screening, or ways to prevent cervical cancer, talk with your provider. They can help you understand more about this cancer.

© 2000-2027 The StayWell Company, LLC. All rights reserved. This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your healthcare professional's instructions
This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your Healthcare professional's instructions. Copyright Krames LLC.