

# Cervical Cancer: Screening



Getting screened for cervical cancer can help you take charge of your health. Screening tests can sometimes find certain cancers early when they're small and before they've spread or caused symptoms. Cancer that is found early is often easier to treat.

When you go for a cervical cancer screening, you can expect to have a few tests, including:

- **Pap test.** This test finds both cervical cancer and changes in cells of the cervix before they become cancer. These are called precancers.
- **HPV test.** This test is used to find signs of human papillomavirus (HPV) infection in the cells of the cervix. Certain types of HPV are linked to cervical cancer. Sometimes, the HPV test is done along with the Pap test. It's then called an HPV/Pap cotest.
- **Pelvic exam.** This exam is often done along with Pap and HPV tests. It can help find some cancers of the uterus and other parts of the female reproductive system.

## What happens during the screening?

For the screening, you lie on a table with your feet in stirrups. Your knees are apart and bent. Your healthcare provider will place a device called a speculum into your vagina. You may feel pressure as the speculum goes in and slight discomfort if it's cold.

The speculum holds your vagina open while your provider uses a small brush to scrape cells from your cervix. The cells that are removed are then sent to a lab. The test results may show that the cells are normal. Or the results may show inflammation, abnormal cells, precancer cells, or cancer cells. The HPV test is done on the cells, too. It shows whether you have an HPV infection.

During a pelvic exam, your healthcare provider will put their fingers into your vagina. They will press on your abdomen with their other hand. The provider is feeling for abnormal lumps (masses) or growths. You may feel a slight discomfort during the exam. But it only takes a few minutes. Your provider may also do a recto-vaginal exam. During this exam, your provider puts 1 finger in your rectum and another finger in your vagina. They then feel the tissue between the 2 areas.

## When and how often should you get screened?

The American Cancer Society (ACS) advises that cervical cancer screening start at age 25. Women ages 25 to 65 should be screened with an HPV test every 5 years. But if an HPV test isn't available, the ACS says that screening can be done with either:

- A Pap test every 3 years, or
- An HPV/Pap cotest every 5 years

Women older than age 65 can stop screening if they have:

- Had regular screenings with normal results for the last 10 years
- Have no history of precancer in the last 25 years

At any age, women can stop screening if they had a total hysterectomy that included taking out the uterus and cervix, unless it was done to treat cervical precancer or cancer. People who have had a hysterectomy but still have their cervix should keep getting screenings per the guidelines.

Women who have been vaccinated against HPV should still follow the screening guidelines for their age group.

Some other expert groups have slightly different screening recommendations. These groups include the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), and the National Cancer Institute. Talk with your provider about the right screening schedule for you.

## **Risk factors for frequent tests**

Women at high risk for cervical cancer may need to be screened more often. You are at high risk if you:

- Have an HIV infection
- Have a weak immune system
- Were exposed to a synthetic hormone called DES before birth

The ACS says women who have had a serious precancer should continue screening for at least 25 years after diagnosis. This applies even if screenings go past age 65. Talk with your healthcare provider about the schedule that is best for you.

## **No insurance? No problem**

Even if you don't have health insurance, you can still keep up with cancer screenings.

The National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program can help. It offers cervical cancer testing to women with no health insurance for free or at little cost. Each state runs its own program.

Contact your state or your county Department of Health to find a program near you. Other private or volunteer clinics in your area may also provide screenings for free or at a lower cost.

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