

# Cervical Cancer: Prevention



Cervical cancer is the 4th most common cancer in women worldwide. Fortunately, there's a lot you can do to lower your risk. There are ways to help prevent precancer, as well as tests to find precancer early—before it has a chance to turn into cervical cancer. Here's how to safeguard your cervical health and avoid future problems.

## Biology basics

First, it's helpful to understand what cervical precancer is in this context. It refers to abnormal cell changes in the cervix. These precancerous changes are not harmful, but they do have the potential to develop into cervical cancer over time. Think of precancer as a warning sign. It's letting you know that if the abnormal cells aren't treated, they might become cancer cells.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is what triggers the cervical cell changes. Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by this virus. HPV is extremely common. It spreads through skin-to-skin sexual contact and usually has no symptoms. However, not every HPV infection will turn into cancer. In fact, HPV tends to clear up on its own. Only certain strains can lead to cervical cancer.

## 3 ways to help prevent precancer

To reduce your risk for cervical cancer, it's important to prevent the precancer cervical cell changes. To protect yourself, make sure to:

### 1. Get the HPV vaccine.

The HPV vaccine can help shield you against certain types of HPV infection. The vaccine works best if you get it before you've been exposed to HPV. The CDC recommends parents get children vaccinated as adolescents, before they become sexually active:

- Children ages 9 to 14 should follow a 2-dose schedule. The shots are given 6 to 12 months apart.
- Teens ages 15 to 26 should follow a 3-dose schedule. The vaccine is given in a series of 3 shots.

There's also a vaccine available for adults ages 27 to 45. If you didn't get vaccinated when you were younger, talk with your healthcare provider to decide if it would be helpful now.

### 2. Use condoms during sex.

Condoms may not always be convenient, but is worth it if it lowers your risk of cervical cancer. Condoms can reduce your chances of getting HPV. They also help protect against chlamydia, another infection that's been linked to a higher risk for cervical cancer.

Use condoms correctly and consistently each time you have sex. But keep in mind that the HPV virus can spread through skin-to-skin contact with infected areas not covered by a condom, such as the surrounding genital skin. Still, even though condoms can't completely prevent infection, they are associated with a lower rate of cervical cancer.

### 3. Steer clear of tobacco products.

Smoking increases your risk for precancerous cervical cells, which could lead to cervical cancer. The carcinogens in tobacco products have been found in cervical mucus. Researchers believe that these substances damage the DNA of cervical cells. Plus, smoking can weaken the immune system. This makes it tougher for your body to fend off HPV infections.

Quitting is not easy. Reach out to your healthcare provider for tips and support. They can help make this transition smoother and more manageable.

## Stay on top of screenings

While the steps above go a long way in reducing your risk for precancer, they can't guarantee full protection. That's why screening tests are so important. The tests can detect cervical cell changes early on. That means your healthcare provider will have time to treat the cells and stop them from progressing to cancer.

The other benefit of screenings: If there is cancer, tests can help find it in the early stages. And catching it early means better chances of successful treatment and a full recovery.

There are 3 types of screening tests:

1. **Pap test.** This looks for precancerous cells on the cervix.
2. **HPV test.** This checks for high-risk HPV infections, though it can't tell if you have cervical cancer. More tests would be needed for a cancer diagnosis.
3. **Co-test.** This combines an HPV test with a Pap test.

The American Cancer Society notes that women should get regular HPV tests starting at age 25. The recommendations for cervical cancer screening say that:

- Women ages 25 to 65 should get an HPV test every 5 years.
- If a standalone HPV test is not an option, the screening can be done with a Pap test every 3 years. Or it can be done with a co-test every 5 years.
- Women older than age 65 may be able to stop screenings if they kept up with regular screenings for the past 10 years with normal results. If you have a history of pre-cancer, you should continue with testing for at least 25 years after the condition was found, even if the testing goes past age 65. Talk with your provider to find out if this applies to you.
- Women who have had a hysterectomy (with removal of the cervix and uterus) and don't have a history of cervical cancer or serious precancer do not need to be screened. Women who have had a hysterectomy without the removal of the cervix should continue cervical cancer screening according to the guidelines.

If you have a high risk for cervical cancer, you may need to get tested more often. Work with your healthcare provider to create the screening schedule that's best for you.

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