

Cervical Cancer: Risk Factors



It isn't always clear why a person gets cancer. But experts know that certain risk factors can raise your odds. Learning about your personal risk factors for cervical cancer can go a long way in protecting your future health. Here's what you should know.

What is a risk factor?

A risk factor is anything that may increase your chance of having a disease. Some risk factors, such as family history, you can't control. But you may be able to change others, like smoking or an unhealthy diet. Knowing the risk factors can help you make choices that might lower your risk.

Keep in mind that risk factors don't cause cancer. But they may increase your risk. Some people have 1 or more risk factors but never get cancer. Others have no known risk factors, but still get cancer anyway. Not all risk factors are well known or understood. Research about them is ongoing.

Who is at risk for cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer occurs in the cervix, which is part of the female reproductive system. Most cases of cervical cancer occur between ages 20 and 50.

HPV

The most common cause of cervical cancer is human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. Usually, these infections are harmless and go away on their own. Most people never know they're infected.

There are more than 150 types of HPV. But only about 14 high-risk strains are linked to most cervical cancers. The only way to tell if you have a high-risk type of HPV is to be tested.

You get high-risk HPV by having sex with someone who has the virus. It is spread through skin-to-skin contact. Using condoms is important. And it may lower your chances of getting HPV. But HPV can infect areas the condom doesn't cover. Condoms do not fully protect against HPV.

Having sex at a young age or with multiple partners puts you at increased risk of cervical cancer. The only sure way to protect yourself is to not have sex or intimate skin-to-skin contact. Or to have sex only with a partner you are sure doesn't have HPV.

Other risk factors

Here are some other risk factors for cervical cancer:

- **Personal or family history of cervical cancer.** Some studies show that having a mother or sister who has had cervical cancer increases your risk for the disease. And if you've had cervical cancer before, you have a higher chance of getting it again.
- **Sexual history.** Sexual activity at a young age (18 years old or younger), having multiple sex partners, and having sex with a high-risk partner can all increase your risk for exposure to high-risk HPV.
- **A weak immune system.** Having HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) or taking medicines that weaken the immune system makes it hard to fight off HPV infections.
- **Long-term use of birth control pills.** Your risk may go down after you stop taking the pills. This is mainly due to the synthetic estrogen and progesterone in birth control pills. These may stimulate the development and growth of some cancers.
- **Some pregnancies.** People who have 3 or more full-term pregnancies are at increased risk for cervical cancer. So are people who had their first full-term pregnancy when they were younger than 20. Those

people are more likely to have cervical cancer later when compared with people who had their first full-term pregnancy when they were age 25 or older.

- **Your birth parent took DES while pregnant with you.** Between the years 1940 and 1971, healthcare providers prescribed the medicine DES (Diethylstilbestrol) to pregnant people to prevent miscarriages, premature labor, and complications of pregnancy. Most people whose birth parents took DES don't get cervical cancer. But they are still at risk for an abnormal type of cervical cancer called DES-related clear cell adenocarcinoma and cervical precancers.

Lifestyle factors

Eating a healthy diet is one way you can help prevent cervical cancer. A diet low in fruits and vegetables is a risk factor, especially when you don't get enough carotene and vitamins A, C, and E. Plus, a healthy diet can help you maintain the weight that's right for you. Some studies have shown that people who are overweight or are obese have a greater chance of getting cervical cancer.

Another important way to prevent cervical cancer is not smoking or breathing in secondhand smoke. If you smoke, you are about twice as likely to get cervical cancer as those who don't smoke. Why? The chemicals in cigarettes end up in your bloodstream and in the mucus in your cervix. Smoking also weakens the immune system. This makes you less able to fight HPV infections.

What are your risk factors?

Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk factors for cervical cancer and what you can do about them.

Healthcare provider visits and other preventive care are crucial. Try to make cervical cancer screening a priority. People who don't get screened for cervical cancer with Pap and HPV tests as recommended have a higher risk of cervical cancer. If you don't have health insurance, there are programs for low-cost or free screenings. Ask your local healthcare clinic about these programs.

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