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Cervical Cancer Screening

What is cervical cancer screening?

Cervical cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/cervicalcancer.html>] is cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/cancer.html>] that starts in the cells of the cervix. The cervix is part of the female reproductive system. It is the lower, narrow end of the uterus (womb), which opens into the vagina (birth canal). Cervical cancer screening is an important part of routine health care for people who have a cervix.

Cervical cancer screening tests look for cancer before you have any symptoms. Cervical cancer usually develops slowly. Before cervical cells become cancer, they start to look abnormal. These cells are called "precancers". If they aren't destroyed or removed, they may become cancer cells that grow out of control and spread to other parts of your body.

Screening can help find abnormal cells so you can get treatment to prevent cervical cancer. These tests can also help to find cervical cancer early when it's usually easier to treat.

What tests screen for cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer screening is usually part of a woman's health checkup [<https://medlineplus.gov/womenshealthcheckup.html>] during a pelvic exam. These tests use a sample of cervical cells that your health care provider collects with a swab:

- A **Pap test** [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/pap-smear/>] (also called a Pap smear or cervical cytology) checks for abnormal cells so they can be treated before they become cancer.
- An **HPV (human papillomavirus) test** [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/human-papillomavirus-hpv-test/>] checks for certain HPV [<https://medlineplus.gov/hpv.html>] infections that can cause cancer. HPV is a group of viruses that spread through sexual contact. The types that cause cancer are called "high-risk HPV."
- The **HPV/Pap cotest** uses an HPV and Pap test together to check for both high-risk HPV and cervical cell changes.

If your screening tests are abnormal, your provider may do more tests, such as a **biopsy** [<https://medlineplus.gov/biopsy.html>]. How often you should be screened for cervical cancer and which tests you should get will depend on your age and health history.

What are the possible benefits and harms of cervical cancer screening?

Cervical cancer screening saves lives. Screening can detect cervical changes early, lowering your chance of dying from cervical cancer. But, cervical cancer screening has potential harms.

The **possible harms** of cervical cancer screening include:

The results can sometimes be wrong.

- Getting a **false-positive result** means that your test results appear abnormal, but there are no precancerous or cancerous cells. A false-positive may lead to:
 - Worry while you have more tests to look for signs of cancer.
 - Follow-up tests or treatment that you may not have needed.

- Getting a **false-negative result** means that your test results appear normal, but there are precancer or cancerous cells. A false-negative may lead to:
 - You may delay seeking treatment even if you have symptoms.

Should I be screened for cervical cancer?

Talk with your provider about how often you should be screened for cervical cancer and which tests you should get. This will depend on your age and health history. If you have a cervix, it's recommended that you have your first Pap smear at age 21 and begin screening with an HPV test at age 25. You may need screening more often if you:



- Had an abnormal HPV test, Pap smear, or cervical biopsy in the recent past.
- Have had a diagnosis of cervical cancer.
- Have a **weakened immune system** [<https://medlineplus.gov/immunesystemanddisorders.html>] .
- Were exposed to a drug called DES (Diethylstilbestrol) before you were born. Between the years 1940-1971, DES was sometimes prescribed to prevent miscarriages [<https://medlineplus.gov/miscarriage.html>] .

If you are over age 65 and have had regular Pap smear screenings with normal results, your provider may tell you that you no longer need them. If you have HIV [<https://medlineplus.gov/hiv.html>] , you may need to continue screenings after age 65.

You don't need cervical cancer screening if you had a total hysterectomy [<https://medlineplus.gov/hysterectomy.html>] (surgery to remove your uterus and cervix) because of a condition that was not cancer. But if your hysterectomy was related to cervical cancer or precancer, ask your provider whether you need screening.

NIH: National Cancer Institute



Start Here

- **Cervical Cancer Screening** [<https://www.cancer.gov/types/cervical/screening>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cuello-uterino/deteccion#section/all>]
- **Get Screened for Cervical Cancer** [<https://odphp.health.gov/myhealthfinder/doctor-visits/screening-tests/get-screened-cervical-cancer>] **Easy-to-Read** (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion)
Also in Spanish [<https://odphp.health.gov/espanol/myhealthfinder/visitas-doctor/pruebas-deteccion/hazte-prueba-deteccion-cancer-cuello-uterino>]
- **HPV and Pap Test Results: Next Steps after an Abnormal Cervical Cancer Screening Test**
[<https://www.cancer.gov/types/cervical/screening/abnormal-hpv-pap-test-results>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/tipos/cuello-uterino/deteccion/resultados-anormales-pruebas-vph-pap>]
- **Screening for Cervical Cancer** [<https://www.cdc.gov/cervical-cancer/screening/>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cdc.gov/cervical-cancer/es/screening/>]


Related Issues

- **I Had a Hysterectomy. Do I Still Need to See My Ob-Gyn? Do I Still Need Pap Tests?** [<https://www.acog.org/womens-health/experts-and-stories/ask-acog/i-had-a-hysterectomy-do-i-still-need-to-see-my-ob-gyn-do-i-need-pap-tests>]
(American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists)
- **Pap Smear: Do I Need One If I'm a Virgin?** [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/pap-smear/expert-answers/pap-smear/faq-20057782?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/tests-procedures/pap-smear/expert-answers/pap-smear/faq-20057782?p=1>]


Specifics

- **Cervical Cancer Screening: Frequently Asked Questions** [<https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/cervical-cancer-screening>] (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists)
- **Colposcopy** [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/colposcopy/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/colposcopia/>]
- **Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Test** [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/human-papillomavirus-hpv-test/>]  (National Library of Medicine)

Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/prueba-del-virus-del-papiloma-humano-vph/>]

- Pap Smear [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/pap-smear/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/prueba-de-papanicolaou/>]
- Understanding Abnormal Cervical Cancer Screening Results [<https://familydoctor.org/how-to-interpret-abnormal-pap-smear-results/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/comprender-los-resultados-anormales-en-las-pruebas-de-deteccion-del-cancer-cervical/?adfree=true>]



Images

- Pap Test [<https://visualsonline.cancer.gov/details.cfm?imageid=8271>]  (National Cancer Institute)

Statistics and Research

- Pap Tests: FastStats [<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/pap-tests.htm>] (National Center for Health Statistics)

Clinical Trials


- ClinicalTrials.gov: Papanicolaou Test [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Papanicolaou+Test%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)
- ClinicalTrials.gov: Vaginal Smears [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?intr=%22Vaginal+Smears%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)

Journal Articles


References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: Psychometric Evidence of the Pap Smear Test and Cervical Cancer Beliefs... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40724096>]
- Article: Validity of the process and outcome specific measure in women with... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40460080>]
- Article: Comprehensive Evaluation of the Utility of Cell Block Use in ThinPrep... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40396967>]
- Cervical Cancer Screening -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%28%22Papanicolaou+Test%22%5Bmajr%5D+AND+%22Vaginal+Smears%22%5Bmajr%5D%29+OR+%22Human+Papillomavirus+DNA+Tests%22%5Bmajr%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+3+Years%22+%5Bdat%5D>]

Reference Desk

- Dictionary of Cancer Terms [<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/dictionaries/cancer-terms>]  (National Cancer Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol/publicaciones/diccionarios/diccionario-cancer/>]

Find an Expert

- American Cancer Society [<https://www.cancer.org/>]
- Choosing a Cancer Doctor [<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/finding-care/where-to-find-cancer-care/choosing-a-cancer-doctor.html>] (American Cancer Society)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.org/es/cancer/como-sobrellevar-el-cancer/encontrar-tratamiento/como-elegir-un-medico-y-un-hospital/como-seleccionar-a-un-medico.html>]
- Find a Screening Program Near You [<https://www.cdc.gov/breast-cervical-cancer-screening/about/screenings.html>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cdc.gov/breast-cervical-cancer-screening/es/about/screenings.html>]
- National Cancer Institute [<https://www.cancer.gov/>] 
Also in Spanish [<https://www.cancer.gov/espanol>]

Patient Handouts

- Cervical cancer - screening and prevention [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000419.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000419.htm>]
- HPV test [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007534.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/007534.htm>]
- Pap test [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003911.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003911.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

- Colposcopy - directed biopsy [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003913.htm>]
- HPV test [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/007534.htm>]

Related Health Topics

- Cervical Cancer [<https://medlineplus.gov/cervicalcancer.html>]
- HPV [<https://medlineplus.gov/hpv.html>]
- Women's Health Checkup [<https://medlineplus.gov/womenshealthcheckup.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Cervical Cancer Screening* is the National Cancer Institute [<http://www.cancer.gov/>]

Other Languages

Find health information in languages other than English [<https://medlineplus.gov/languages/cervicalcancerscreening.html>] on *Cervical Cancer Screening*

NIH MedlinePlus Magazine

How Fashion Designer Liz Lange Beat Cervical Cancer [<https://magazine.medlineplus.gov/article/how-fashion-designer-liz-lange-beat-cervical-cancer>]

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