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## Overview

### What is cervical cancer?

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus that leads to the vagina. It is made of cells that divide, grow, and shed. The cells on the surface of the cervix are called squamous cells. The cells in the glandular tissue of the cervix are called columnar cells.

### How common is cervical cancer?

An estimated 12,000 new cases of cervical cancer occur each year in the United States, and each year about 4,000 U.S. women will die from this disease.

### How long does it take for cervical cancer to develop?

It takes several years for cervical cancer to develop. During this time, the cells on or around the cervix become abnormal. The early cell changes that occur before cancer is present are called [dysplasia](#) or [cervical intraepithelial neoplasia \(CIN\)](#).

## HPV and Cervical Cancer

## What is the main cause of cervical cancer?

The main cause of cervical cancer is [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#) infection. There are many types of HPV. Some types of HPV, called “high-risk types,” can cause cancer of the [anus](#), cervix, [vulva](#), [vagina](#), and penis. They can also cause cancer of the head and neck. Other HPV types have been linked to genital warts.

HPV infection is very common. It is passed from person to person through sexual contact. Some research suggests that at least 3 in 4 people who have sex will get a genital HPV infection at some time during their lives. However, being infected with HPV does not necessarily mean that a person will get genital warts or develop cancer.

## Does HPV always lead to cervical cancer?

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## When should people get the HPV vaccine?

Vaccination works best when it is done before a person is sexually active and exposed to HPV. But vaccination can still reduce the risk of getting HPV for people who have already been sexually active.

The ideal age for HPV vaccination of girls and boys is 11 or 12. But anyone can get the vaccine starting at age 9 and through age 26.

If you are older than 26, have not been vaccinated, and are at risk of a new HPV infection, you and your health care professional can talk about whether you need the HPV vaccine. The vaccine is approved for people through age 45.

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## Risk Factors and Screening Tests

### Who is at risk of cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer can occur at any age. It occurs most often after age 40, but it can occur at younger ages too. However, it rarely occurs before age 21.

Your risk of cervical cancer depends on your sexual history, your immune system, your health, and your lifestyle. The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection

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- Smoking
- Certain [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#), such as chlamydia
- Problems with the immune system
- Having a mother who took a drug called diethylstilbestrol (DES) during pregnancy

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### Is there a screening test for cervical cancer?

Yes. Cervical cancer is largely preventable by having regular cervical cancer screening. About one half of cervical cancer cases occur in women who have never had screening.

Cervical cancer screening includes the [Pap test](#), an HPV test, or both. The Pap test checks for abnormal cell changes of the cervix. The HPV test can detect many high-risk types of HPV even before there are visible changes to cervical cells. Read [Cervical Cancer Screening](#) for more information.

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## Symptoms and Diagnosis

### What are some of the symptoms of cervical cancer?

Cervical dysplasia and cancer of the cervix often have no symptoms. By the time symptoms appear, the cancer cells may have already spread.

When symptoms do occur, the first signs may be abnormal bleeding, spotting, or watery

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### How is cervical cancer diagnosed?

If your health care professional suspects that you have cervical cancer, a biopsy may be done. Cancer can be detected with a Pap test, but a biopsy is needed to be sure.

If cervical cancer is diagnosed, your health care professional will assess the size of the cancer and the extent (if any) to which the disease has spread. This process may include the following tests:

- A [pelvic exam](#) (which may include a rectal exam)—An exam of the [uterus](#), [ovaries](#), and other organs near the cervix
- Cystoscopy—A test in which the inside of the [urethra](#) and bladder are studied with a lighted device

- Colonoscopy—A test in which the entire colon is examined with a lighted device

Because cervical cancer can spread to other areas of the body, you may need other tests to check these areas.

## What are the stages of cervical cancer?

“Staging” is the process of finding out how much the cancer has spread. Most types of cancer have stages from I to IV. The lower the number, the less the cancer has spread.

Some types of cancer, including cervical cancer, have a Stage 0. Stage 0 is also called noninvasive cervical cancer or carcinoma in situ (CIS). In Stage 0, cancer cells are present on the top layer of the cervix only. They have not gone into deeper layers of the cervix.

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Stages II to IV also have substages.

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## Treatment

### How is invasive cervical cancer treated?

Invasive cancer of the cervix is treated with surgery, [radiation therapy](#), and [chemotherapy](#) (the use of cancer-killing drugs). The type of treatment chosen depends on the cancer stage. You may receive more than one type of treatment.

Treatment works best at early stages of cancer. The 5-year survival rate for stage I cancer is 91 percent. The 5-year survival rate for stage IV cancer is 17 percent.

## What is involved in surgical treatment for cervical cancer?

If surgery is recommended, the goal is to remove the tumor and any tissues where it may spread. In a simple [hysterectomy](#), the cervix and uterus are removed. The ovaries may not be removed if they appear normal. In a radical hysterectomy, the structures that support the uterus and a small part of the upper vagina are also removed. The ovaries, [fallopian tubes](#), and nearby lymph nodes may be removed too.

## What is involved in radiation therapy for cervical cancer?

Radiation therapy stops cancer cells from growing by exposing them to special radiation.

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## What is involved in chemotherapy for cervical cancer?

Chemotherapy is the use of cancer-killing drugs. Chemotherapy drugs travel through the blood and destroy different types of cells, including cancer cells. The treatments may be given in cycles either in a doctor’s office or clinic, or it may require a hospital stay. It can be given alone or with radiation to make the radiation therapy more successful.

## Is special follow-up required after treatment?

Depending on the stage of cancer and the type of treatment, cervical cancer usually does not return. But close follow-up is needed. Routine checkups and cervical cancer screening tests are important, even after treatment ends.

Your health care professional may suggest more frequent cervical cancer screening tests for the first few years after treatment to make sure that all the cancer cells were removed. Even if your cervix has been removed to treat your cancer, you still need cervical cancer screening. Cells are taken from the upper vagina instead of the cervix.

You may also need other tests and procedures. You and your health care professional should work together to plan your follow-up care.

## Glossary

**Anus:** The opening of the digestive tract through which bowel movements leave the body.

**Biopsy:** A microscopic examination to remove a small piece of tissue. This tissue is examined under a microscope to see if it has cancer.

**Bladder:**

**Cells:** ACOG uses cookies, pixels and similar technologies to personalize your website experience. By clicking “continue” or continuing to use our site, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#).

**Cervical:** are called

**Cervix:**

**Chemotherapy:** Treatment of cancer with drugs.

**Dysplasia:** A noncancerous condition that happens when normal cells are replaced by a layer of abnormal cells.

**Fallopian Tubes:** Tubes through which an egg travels from the ovary to the uterus.

**Human Papillomavirus (HPV):** The name for a group of related viruses, some of which cause genital warts and some of which are linked to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, mouth, and throat.

**Hysterectomy:** Surgery to remove the uterus.

**Immune System:** The body’s natural defense system against viruses and bacteria that cause disease.

**Lymph Nodes:** Small groups of special tissue that carry lymph, a liquid that bathes body cells. Lymph nodes are connected to each other by lymph vessels. Together, these make up the lymphatic system.

**Ovaries:** Organs in women that contain the eggs necessary to get pregnant and make important hormones, such as estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone.

**Pap Test:** A test in which cells are taken from the cervix (or vagina) to look for signs of cancer.

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**Vagina:** A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

**Vulva:** The external female genital area.

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If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

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FAQ163

Last updated: October 2023

Last reviewed: May 2023

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