

Spotlight on Health

Cervical Cancer Screening

The Pap test is used by healthcare providers to find women that might be at risk of cervical cancer (cervical cancer screening). The test has saved many lives because this type of cancer can be treated effectively if found early. A virus called the human papillomavirus (HPV) causes most cervical cancers. Knowing this, healthcare providers often use an HPV test together with a Pap test. This approach is called “co-testing” and is used to screen for cervical cancer mostly in women 30 to 65 years of age.

This newsletter will help you understand the importance of cervical cancer screening. It will also discuss Pap testing, HPV testing, and co-testing.

Why Screening for Cervical Cancer is Important

Cancer of the cervix, the lowest part of the uterus (womb), used to be the leading cause of cancer death in women in the United States. However, in the 1940s healthcare providers started using the Pap test. Since screening using the Pap test began, more at-risk women are found early on and fewer get cervical cancer.^{1,2} But not all women get the Pap test regularly, and about half of all cervical cancers happen in women who have never been tested.³

Cervical Cancer and HPV

Cervical cancer is usually caused by infection with certain types of HPV,³ a virus that is mostly spread by skin-to-skin contact during sex. The virus is so common that almost every person who has sex regularly will get HPV at some time in their life.⁴ An HPV infection usually goes away by itself and does not cause any problems. In fact, most people will never know that they ever had HPV.

When it doesn't go away, an HPV infection can cause changes in cervical cells that lead to cancer.^{5,6} Types of HPV that cause cervical cancer are called “high-risk HPV.” Other types of HPV can cause genital warts, but do not cause cancer.

Both men and women can be infected by and spread HPV. Because HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact, condoms are generally not considered effective to prevent infection.

Screening for Cervical Cancer

Healthcare providers use screening to detect cervical cancer in women who have no signs of it. When cancer occurs, it takes a long time for the cells of the cervix to become cancerous. Fortunately, Pap and HPV tests work together to pick up early signs of problems.

The Pap test finds abnormal cells.⁷ When they are found, healthcare providers can make sure the patient receives the right care and treatment.⁷ If the cells look like they might become cancer, they can be removed.

The HPV test shows if your cells are having trouble clearing the HPV infection. Most of the time, your body will eventually clear the HPV by itself. But your healthcare provider will likely want to retest you at another time, just to make sure.



Benefits of Co-testing

Co-testing helps to⁴

- Detect abnormal precancerous cells earlier than Pap testing alone
- Detect some types of cervical cancer that are not detected by the Pap test alone
- Possibly decrease the frequency of screening needed

HPV Vaccine

A vaccine is available in the United States that helps protect against the HPV high-risk types that cause cancer. HPV vaccination can lower your risk of cervical cancer. The vaccine also helps protect against types that cause genital warts.⁸ The vaccine is recommended for males and females ages 9 to 26 years old. Males can be infected and not know it. If they are infected, they can pass the infection to women through sex. Vaccinating males also helps protect women.

Cervical Cancer Screening Recommendations

Screening recommendations depend on your age:

- If you are a woman 21 to 29 years old, a Pap test alone is recommended every 3 years.^{4,7} In this age group, about 9 out of 10 HPV infections go away by themselves.⁶ So the risk for cervical cancer is very low in this group.
- If you are a woman 30 to 65 years old, co-testing that includes *both* an HPV test and a Pap test done at the same time is recommended every 5 years. In fact, co-testing is the preferred screening method for this age group according to some guidelines.⁷ That's because fewer HPV infections go away by themselves in these women, and the risk of cancer is higher. Co-testing also has other benefits (see Sidebar).

What You Can Do

If you are a woman 21 to 65 years old, regular testing should be part of your personal healthcare. Talk with your healthcare provider about what kind of cervical cancer screening is best for you, and how often you should be tested. Remember, cervical cancer testing isn't recommended every year. But it is important that you still get a well-woman exam each year, which may include a variety of tests, evaluations, and counseling. A yearly checkup gives your healthcare provider a chance to evaluate your overall health and can help uncover any health problems early on.

If you are over 65 and have had recent cervical cancer screening tests that were negative, you probably don't need to continue testing unless you have a high risk of cancer. Talk with your healthcare provider about whether you need testing.

If you are 26 years or younger and have not had an HPV vaccine yet, talk to your healthcare provider about getting vaccinated (see Sidebar). HPV vaccination lowers your risk of cervical cancer.

How the Laboratory Can Help

When it is time to be screened, your healthcare provider will collect some cells from your cervix. This specimen is then sent to the laboratory for testing. The laboratory can do both Pap and HPV tests. The laboratory can also test for other sexually transmitted diseases if your healthcare provider thinks this is necessary.

For more information, visit QuestDiagnostics.com/home/patients/health-test-info/cancer/cervical/pap-testing.html.

References

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