

## HEALTH MATTERS

# Making Sense of Cervical Cancer

[www.arhp.org/healthmatters](http://www.arhp.org/healthmatters)

### Cervical Cancer

#### What is cervical cancer?

- The cervix is the lower part of your uterus (womb).
- Cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer) is a serious but preventable disease.
- Screening tests can find changes in cervical cells before cancer develops.
- Changes in cervical cells before cancer develops are called dysplasia (dis-PLAY-zha).
- Removing cells that have dysplasia can prevent cervical cancer.
- If left untreated, dysplasia can lead to cervical cancer.
- Screening tests can help prevent cervical cancer.
- Cervical cancer can be cured if it's found at an early stage.

#### What causes cervical cancer?

- Cervical cancer is caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV).
- HPV is not the same as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, which causes AIDS) or herpes simplex virus (HSV, which causes cold sores and genital herpes).
- Infection with HPV is very common among adults in the United States. In fact, most people will have HPV at some point in their lives.
- Usually, your body's immune system fights off the infection, and HPV goes away on its own.

### HPV

#### Is HPV infection serious?

- There are many types of HPV.
- The types that can lead to cervical cancer are called high-risk types.
- Other types, called low-risk types, may cause genital warts but do not cause cervical cancer.
- High-risk HPV is a problem only when it doesn't go away. If it stays in your body for a long time, it can lead to cervical cancer.

#### Are there symptoms of HPV?

- No, HPV infection doesn't cause symptoms, so most people don't know they have it.
- A person can have HPV for a very long time before it's found.

#### How does a person get HPV?

- HPV is spread from one person to another by skin-to-skin contact in the genital area.
- HPV can be spread even if there is no intercourse.
- HPV can be spread by vaginal, anal, and oral sex.

#### Are there any ways to avoid getting HPV?

Four things can reduce your risk for getting HPV:

- Avoid sexual contact.
- Limit your sexual partners.
- Use condoms or dental dams. Condoms and dental dams don't fully protect from

HPV, but they can lower the chance you'll get it. Condoms also help prevent HIV, herpes, and other sexually transmitted infections.

- Get vaccinated. There are two HPV vaccines, Gardasil and Cervarix. Both are safe and effective in preventing the majority of cervical cancers and abnormal Paps. Gardasil, can also prevent the majority of genital warts.

## Cervical Cancer Screening

### What screening tests are done for cervical cancer?

There are two main kinds of screening tests: the Pap test and the HPV test.

### What is the Pap test?

The Pap test is used to look for abnormal cervical cells.

- Pap tests are often done during the pelvic exam portion of a well-woman visit.
- During a Pap test, your health care provider will collect a sample of cervical cells for analysis by a laboratory.
- About 90% of Pap test results are normal.
- If the test result is abnormal, you may need more tests.
- In most cases an abnormal Pap result does not mean that a woman has cancer.

### What is the HPV test?

- The HPV test is a very accurate way to tell if high-risk HPV is present in a woman's cervix.
- This test can use the same sample of cells taken for the Pap test or a separate sample taken right after the Pap.
- A positive test result means a woman has high-risk HPV. She should be followed closely to make sure the infection goes away and that she does not develop abnormal cells.
- A positive HPV test result does not necessarily mean that a woman has cancer.
- Also, a positive HPV test result is not necessarily a sign that you or your partner had sex outside the relationship. A person can have HPV for a long time before it's found.

### When would an HPV test be done?

- The HPV test is used in two ways:
  - To see if a woman with a borderline Pap test result (one that shows unusual cells but not dysplasia) needs additional tests.

- To screen for cervical cancer, along with the Pap test, in women aged 30 or older. Women 30 or older who have HPV are more likely to have had it a long time. That means they have a greater risk of developing cervical cancer.
- Women in their 20s don't always need an HPV test in addition to the Pap test. HPV infection is very common in this age group and usually goes away.

### When should women be screened for cervical cancer?

- Experts recommend that a woman's first Pap test be done by age 21 or three years after she becomes sexually active with vaginal intercourse—whichever is first.
- Women under age 30 should speak to their health care provider about how often to have a Pap test.
- Women age 30 or older can have an HPV test along with the Pap test. Women who have a normal Pap test result and a negative HPV test result should have both tests repeated in three years.
- Women age 70 or older should discuss with their health care provider whether or not to continue cervical cancer screening.
- Women who have had a total hysterectomy (surgery to remove the uterus and cervix) that was not performed to treat cancer or dysplasia don't need to be screened.

### How can I find out more about cervical cancer screening?

For help understanding the results of your screening tests, go to [www.arhp.org/PapResults](http://www.arhp.org/PapResults).

### Talking with Your Partner About HPV

Finding out you have HPV can be disturbing. It's important to make sure you have the facts about HPV to discuss with your partner:

- Most adults have HPV at some point in their lives.
- HPV doesn't cause symptoms and usually goes away on its own.
- Most people with HPV don't know they have it.
- Usually it is impossible to know which partner gave a person HPV.
- HPV is not a sign that you or your partner was unfaithful.
- It is not helpful or fair to blame your partner if you have HPV.