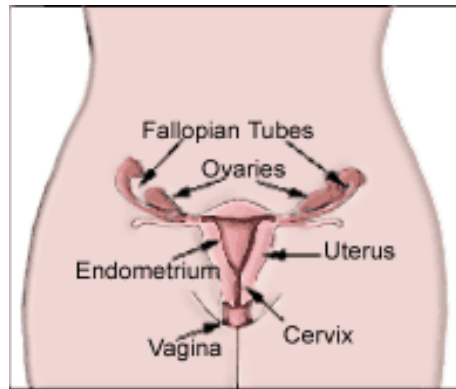


## January Is Cervical Health Awareness Month

### What is the Cervix?

The cervix is part of the female reproductive system. It is the lower, narrow part of the uterus (womb). The uterus, a hollow, pear-shaped organ, is located in a woman's lower belly, between the bladder and the rectum. The cervix forms a canal that opens into the vagina.



### What Is Cervical Cancer?

Cancer occurs when cells become abnormal and divide without control or order. Like all other organs of the body, the cervix is made up of many types of cells. Normally, cells divide to make more cells only when the body needs them. If cells keep dividing when new cells are not needed, a mass of tissue forms. This mass of extra tissue, called a growth or tumor, can be benign or malignant.

- Benign tumors are not cancer. Cells from benign tumors do not spread to other parts of the body. Benign tumors are not a threat to life. Polyps, cysts, and genital warts are types of benign growths of the cervix.
- Malignant tumors are cancer. Cancer cells can invade and damage tissues and organs near the tumor. Cancer cells can break away from a cancerous tumor and enter the lymphatic system (which helps fight infection) or the bloodstream. This is how cancer can spread to other parts of the body, such as nearby lymph nodes, rectum, bladder, bones, and lungs. The spread of cancer is called metastasis.

Cells on the surface of the cervix sometimes appear abnormal but are not cancerous. Some abnormal changes in cells on the cervix are the first step in a series of slow changes that can lead to cancer years later.

### What Are the Key Statistics About Cervical Cancer?

- It occurs most often in women between the age of 35 and 44.
- About 13,820 new cases of invasive cervical cancer will be diagnosed in 2024 and about 4,360 women will die from the disease.

- Both African-American and Hispanic women have higher rates of cervical cancer than white women.
- The number of cervical cancer cases has decreased over the past several decades.
- Death rates have also decreased over the past decades with the increased use of the Pap test (or Pap smear).

### **Who's At Risk for Cervical Cancer?**

- Women with the human papillomavirus (HPV) infection
- Women who smoke
- Women whose immune systems are weakened. Including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), those who are being treated for an autoimmune disease, or those who have had an organ transplant.
- Overweight women
- Women taking oral contraceptives (OCs) for more than 5 years
- Women who have had 3 or more full-term pregnancies
- Women who were younger than 17 years when they had their first full-term pregnancy
- Women do not have regular screening for cervical cancer
- Women whose mothers were given the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) between 1940 and 1971 to prevent miscarriage
- Women with a family history of cervical cancer
- Women who have sexual encounters with known HPV carriers

### **What are the signs and symptoms of cervical cancer?**

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding is bleeding between periods, after sexual intercourse, douching, or a pelvic exam. It is not uncommon for women to have spotting after pelvic exams. Menstrual bleeding may last longer and be heavier than usual.
- Bleeding after menopause (the time of life when a woman's menstrual periods stop for at least a year).
- Vaginal discharge that has a foul smell, unusual color, or is more than usual.
- Painful intercourse

Precancerous changes of the cervix usually do not cause pain or any other symptoms. These changes are only found if a woman has a pelvic exam and a Pap smear.

These symptoms may be caused by cancer or by other health problems. It is important for a woman to see her healthcare team if she is having any of these symptoms.

### **Can cervical cancer be found early?**

- Regular pelvic exams and Pap smears can help find cancers early.
- In a pelvic exam, a healthcare provider checks the uterus, vagina, ovaries, fallopian tubes, bladder, and rectum. These organs are checked for any abnormality in their shape, size, or appearance. An

instrument called a speculum is used to widen the vagina so that the upper part of the vagina and the cervix can be seen.

- The Pap smear is a simple test to detect abnormal cells in and around the cervix. A woman should have this test when she is not menstruating; the best time is between 10 and 20 days after the first day of her menstrual period. For about 2 days before a Pap smear, she should avoid douching or using spermicidal foams, creams, or jellies or vaginal medicines (except as directed by a healthcare provider), which may wash away or hide any abnormal cells.

The American Cancer Society recommends that:

- All women should begin cervical cancer screening at age 25
- Women over age 65 should have testing based on provider recommendation
- Screening after a total hysterectomy (with removal of the cervix) is not necessary unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical cancer or pre-cancer.

### **How can cervical cancer be prevented?**

- Having regular testing (screening) to find pre-cancers before they can turn into invasive cancer
- Quit smoking or avoid secondhand smoke
- Use a condom if you are sexually active
- Get the HPV vaccine:
  - The HPV vaccine, Gardasil® 9, is most effective when given to young men and women **before** they become sexually active. It can be given up until the age of 45. The vaccine protects against the types of HPV that cause 90% of cervical cancers.
  - Discuss with your healthcare team

### **What will happen if my Pap smear is abnormal?**

If your Pap smear is abnormal, your healthcare team may suggest a repeat Pap smear or an exam in the office called a colposcopy. During this exam a colposcope, which is like a magnifying glass, is used to look at the cervix and vagina. Abnormal areas can be biopsied and examined for abnormal cells under a microscope. The result of this test helps your healthcare team to make treatment recommendations.

### **Cancer Prevention Trials at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey**

If you would like information about clinical trials for preventing cancer, please call Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey's Office of Human Research Services at 732-235-7356. For additional information about nationwide cancer prevention trials, you can call the National Cancer Institute at 1-800-4 CANCER or visit their website at [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov).

## **Where can I find further information?**

Resource and Learning Center

732-235-9639

[www.cinj.org/rlc](http://www.cinj.org/rlc)

National Cancer Institute

1-800-4-CANCER

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

The American Cancer Society

1-800-ACS-2345

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

National Cervical Cancer Coalition

(818) 909-3849

[www.nccc-online.org](http://www.nccc-online.org)



RLC website  
Scan with smartphone / device