

preventing cervical cancer





What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer develops in the cervix, the part of the uterus (or womb) that opens into the vagina. It occurs when cells of the cervix become abnormal and start to grow in an uncontrolled fashion. In the pre-cancer stage when the cell changes are mild, the abnormal cells usually disappear on their own without any treatment. Sometimes, the abnormal cells do not disappear and over time, these can change to cervical cancer. There are often no obvious symptoms with these abnormal cervical cell changes, and the only way they can be found is by cervical screening (Pap test).

What causes cervical cancer?

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by certain types of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), a virus that is transmitted by sexual contact, not just sexual intercourse. There are more than 100 types of HPV and about 40 of these that can infect the genital area. Some of the genital HPV types cause genital warts and about 15 others can cause cervical cancer. Women with genital warts do not have an increased risk for cervical cancer. HPV is very common and there are usually no symptoms. Most adults will have HPV at some time in their lives and it will usually go away on its own within 24 months without any problem. Once the HPV has cleared, the risk for cervical cancer returns to normal.



Did you know?

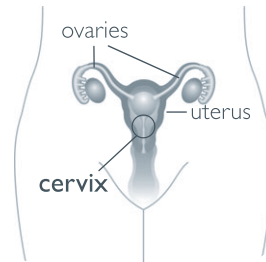
HPV is very common in adults, and will usually go away on its own without any problem.

Other factors that can increase the risk for cervical cancer

HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer. Other factors that can increase the risk for cervical cancer include inadequate screening, multiple sexual partners, starting sexual activity at a young age, sexual behavior of male partner, and cigarette smoking.

How does cervical cancer develop?

For some women, the HPV will not go away. Over time, the HPV can cause cervical cells to become abnormal, which may eventually change to cervical cancer. Abnormal cervical cells can be easily removed with little effect on your fertility or ability to give birth. Once cervical cancer has developed, treatments can become more complicated and less successful. Regular screening offers the best chance of finding abnormal cervical cells early so they can be easily removed.



Preventing HPV

How do I get HPV?

Genital HPV is usually transmitted by sexual contact, not just sexual intercourse. Although condoms are very effective in preventing other sexually transmitted infections, they are not as effective in preventing HPV. This is because HPV can be found on skin not covered by the condom.

HPV vaccination

HPV vaccines can prevent the two most common types of HPV linked to cervical cancers but may not be effective if there has already been an infection with these HPV types. Because the vaccines can only prevent certain HPV types, regular cervical screening should continue even after vaccination.

Can HPV be treated?

There are treatments for the HPV types that cause genital warts, but these have not been shown to work for the HPV types that cause cervical cancer. Most HPV infections will usually go away on their own within 24 months without any problem. Cigarette smoking can delay or prevent this process. Genital HPVs are not known to have any effect on pregnancy.

Cervical Screening

Regular cervical screening (Pap test) is the best protection against cervical cancer.

How does cervical screening work?

Cervical screening is currently done using the Pap test. To do a Pap test, your doctor or health care provider will gently collect a sample of cells from your cervix using a small spatula or a brush. The sample will be sent to the laboratory where they will use a microscope to look for any abnormal cells.



Did you know?

Regular screening (Pap test) is the best way to find abnormal cervical cells early when they can easily be removed.

Who should be screened and how often?

All women who have ever had sex should be regularly screened. At first, you should be screened once a year for the first three years. If these results are normal, you can then be tested every two years. Screening may be stopped after age 69 if you have had normal results for the past 10 years and no abnormal results before that. Women who have passed the menopause or had their tubes tied should also be screened. If you have had a complete hysterectomy (surgery to remove the entire uterus with the cervix) or you are not sure what to do, ask your doctor or health care provider about what would be best for you.

Where do I go for screening?

Cervical screening (Pap test) is free of charge and is offered by family doctors and other clinics throughout the province. Call your doctor or health care provider to make an appointment. Screening should not be done during your period. Douching or using treatments, lubricants or foam, inside your vagina should be avoided for 48 hours prior to your appointment.

What happens after screening?

Within 6 to 8 weeks of your screening, a report will be sent to your doctor or health care provider who will then contact you only if any abnormal cells are found. Several results are possible:

Normal: Most women will have a normal result. In this case, continue with your regular screening.

Mild atypia: This means that mildly abnormal cervical cells have been found on your Pap test. The mildly abnormal cells usually return to normal with time but another Pap test should be done in 6 months to follow up. If the mild atypia does not go away within 2 years, you will be referred to a specialist for a closer examination of your cervix.

Moderate or severe atypia: This means that the abnormal cervical cells show moderate or more severe changes. Only a small number of women with this finding will actually have cancer. If you have moderate or severe atypia, you will be referred to a specialist for a closer examination of your cervix.



High-quality screening can prevent 7 out of 10 cases of cervical cancer

Is cervical screening reliable?

No screening test is perfect. Regular Pap tests offer the best chance of finding abnormal cell changes to prevent most cervical cancers.

Pap test performance can be limited when:

- the sampling spatula or brush misses the area of the cervix where the abnormal cells are located
- the abnormal cells picked-up by the spatula or brush are not transferred to the microscope slide



Did you know?

Cervical screening is free of charge and is offered by family doctors and other clinics throughout the province. Call your doctor or health care provider to make an appointment.

- insignificant cell changes look like pre-cancer or cancer cells
- the abnormal cervical cells on the slides are difficult to recognize

The Cervical Cancer Screening Program in British Columbia continually monitors Pap test performance, and looks for ways to improve. The Program has successfully reduced the cervical cancer rate in British Columbia to one of the lowest in the world.

Regular cervical screening offers the best protection against cervical cancer.

If you have any abnormal bleeding or spotting, you should contact your doctor or health care provider immediately, even if your most recent Pap smear was normal.

HPV testing

HPV testing can be used in three possible ways:

1. As a screening test with the Pap test to help find women at risk of developing cervical cancer.
2. As a follow-up test after a mildly abnormal Pap test result to help decide if treatment is needed or not.
3. As a follow-up test for women after treatment for abnormal cervical cells to help decide if the treatment has been successful.

The Cervical Cancer Screening Program is currently investigating the use of HPV testing in the province of BC.

Before having an HPV test, consider the following:

- HPV is very common in women under the age of 30, and will usually go away on its own without any problem. Thus, HPV testing is not recommended for women under age 30.
- HPV infection in men can be found anywhere in the genital area. Thus, it is difficult to collect a sample for HPV testing.

For more information, please call the Cervical Cancer Screening Program at 604.877.6200 or visit our website at: www.bccancer.bc.ca/cervicalscreening

KEY POINTS:

- Almost all cervical cancers are caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).
- Genital HPV is usually spread by sexual contact, not just sexual intercourse.
- HPV is very common and there are usually no symptoms. Most adults will have HPV at some time in their lives and it will usually go away on its own within 24 months without any problem.
- For some women, the HPV will not go away. Over time, the HPV can cause abnormal cervical cells that can change to cervical cancer.
- Regular cervical screening (Pap test) is the best way to find abnormal cervical cells early when they can be easily removed.
- All women who have ever had sex should be screened once a year for the first 3 years, then every 2 years until age 69.
- Cervical screening is free of charge and is offered by family doctors and other clinics throughout the province. Call your doctor or health care provider to make an appointment.
- The HPV vaccines available can prevent most but not all cervical cancers. Regular screening is the best protection against cervical cancer, even after vaccination.



BC Cancer Agency
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CERVICAL CANCER
SCREENING PROGRAM

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The BC Cancer Agency is committed to reducing the incidence of cancer, reducing the mortality from cancer, and improving the quality of life of those living with cancer. It provides a comprehensive cancer control program for the people of B.C. by working with community partners to deliver a range of oncology services, including prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment, research, education, supportive care, rehabilitation and palliative care.

The BC Cancer Foundation is an independent charitable organization that supports research and care at the BC Cancer Agency. You can help support cancer research by donating to the BC Cancer Foundation at 604.877.6040 or toll free 1.888.906.CURE (2873) or visit their website at: www.bccancerfoundation.com



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