

Cervix Screening

Answering your questions about cervical cancer screening

Cervix screening involves a test called a Pap test that can find abnormal cells in the cervix before they become cancer.

If these abnormal cells are found and treated early, cervical cancer can be stopped from developing. Screening can also identify cancer at an early stage – before it can cause symptoms. If cervical cancer is caught at its earliest stage, the chance of survival is more than 85 per cent. Cervical cancer usually has no symptoms.

However, some symptoms of cervical cancer may include:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding (such as bleeding in between periods, bleeding during/after sex or after menopause);
- Abnormal or persistent vaginal discharge; or,
- Pelvic pain, or pain during sexual intercourse.

If you experience any of these symptoms, see your health care provider.

Who should get screened?

Anyone with a cervix, including women and transgender people, between the ages of 25 to 69 should be screened for cervical cancer every three years. Cervical cancer screening (Pap test) can stop at age 69 if your results have always been normal. Ask your health care provider if you should still be tested.

You should still screen regularly for cervical cancer if:

- You've been through menopause;
- You've ever been sexually active, even if you are not sexually active right now; You've had the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine; or,
- You're in a same-sex relationship.

You do not need to screen for cervical cancer if:

- You've had your cervix removed for any reason (such as total hysterectomy or gender affirming surgeries).

What you should know

- If you have a cervix and are between 25-69, you should have a cervix screening (Pap test) every three years.
- Screening every three years can reduce your risk of cervical cancer by 70 per cent.
- Screening can find abnormal cells in the cervix, which, if treated early, can stop the cancer from developing.
- If cervical cancer is caught at its earliest stage, the chance of survival is more than 85 per cent.

What happens during cervix screening?

Cervix screening involves a screening test known as a Pap test. An instrument called a speculum is gently inserted in your vagina so your health care provider can see your cervix. Your provider will then collect some cells from your cervix using a small brush or spatula. Cervix screening is not usually painful, but can be uncomfortable.

How do I get screened?

Cervix screening can be done by a doctor, nurse practitioner, registered nurse, midwife or naturopathic doctor at their office or clinic. The test is free and only takes a few minutes of your time.

An abnormal screening result does not mean you have cancer.

An abnormal cervix screening result means that cells have been found on your cervix that do not look normal. Abnormal results are common and do not mean you have cancer or pre-cancerous cells. Often these abnormal cells return to

normal by themselves. But in some cases, they may not return to normal on their own, and become pre-cancerous cells that need to be removed. You need to discuss your results and the need for further tests or treatment with your health care provider. It is important that you attend all follow-up appointments.

How can I reduce my risk of getting cervical cancer?

You can take two steps to prevent cervical cancer – get screened every three years and get the HPV vaccine if they are between the ages of 9-45.

The HPV vaccine is provided free to students in Grade 6 in BC. The vaccine protects against types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer. If you have received the vaccine, you still need to be screened, as the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer. To learn more about the HPV vaccine visit www.immunizebc.ca.

What causes cervical cancer?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection causes almost all cervical cancers. HPV can take more than ten years to progress to pre-cancerous cells or cervical cancer.

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a virus that usually clears up on its own without causing any problems.

Two groups of HPV can infect the cervix – low risk and high risk. Low risk types are not associated with cervical cancer but may cause genital warts and abnormal screening results. Long term infection with a high risk type of HPV may lead to cervical cancer or pre-cancerous cells.

HPV is very common and easily spread through any kind of sexual contact. This includes intimate touching, oral, vaginal and anal sex.

Most people will get HPV at some point in their lives – often without knowing it. Usually the body’s immune system removes the virus within two years. But sometimes, HPV does not clear on its own, and over time, it can cause the cells of the cervix to become abnormal.

Things to consider:

- No screening test is perfect. Even under the best conditions, there are some cases where cervix screening results may indicate a cervical abnormality when there are no abnormal cells (false-positive) or the test results may be normal when there are pre-cancerous cells or cervical cancer present (false-negative).
- Cervix screening is not effective if you are younger. For those under age 25, most of the cervical abnormalities identified through screening usually resolve on their own within about 2 years. But if screened, this would result in unnecessary follow-up/treatment, which can lead to unnecessary anxiety and distress, or long-term consequences for future pregnancy (pre-term birth or low birth weight).
- If you have any symptoms of cervical cancer, please talk to your health care provider. It is important to monitor your health and be aware of any unusual changes – even if you recently had a normal cervix screen.

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