

What You Should Know About Cervical Cancer and HPV

Cervical cancer begins in the cervix, which is the part of the uterus that opens to the vagina. It has become rare in the United States in recent years because most women get Pap tests that detect it before it starts or find it early enough to treat it easily.

IMPORTANCE OF REGULAR PAP TESTS

A Pap test, which is conducted during a pelvic exam, helps doctors identify early changes in the cervix that might lead to cancer.

According to the American Cancer Society Web site ([http://www.cancer.org](#)), abnormal results on a Pap test are common and don't always result in a cancer diagnosis. However, it is still important to have the test done regularly. Keep these points in mind:

- If cancer does occur, the Pap test can find it early when it is easier to treat.
- Your doctor or nurse can tell you how often you should have a Pap test.

WHAT IS HPV?

Changes in the cervix are often caused by a virus called HPV, which is short for human papillomavirus. Almost everyone who has ever had sex has had HPV at some time in his or her life. There are no symptoms and most people never even know they have it.

HPV is spread through sex and it can cause an infection in the cervix. There is no treatment for HPV, but usually the infection goes away after a while on its own because your body fights it off.

If the HPV doesn't go away, the virus may cause cervix cells to change and become precancer cells. Precancer

cells are not cancer.

Most cells with early precancer changes return to normal on their own. But sometimes, the precancer cells may turn into cancer if they are not found and treated.

Because HPV is so common, any woman who has ever had sex can be at risk of developing cervical cancer. However, most women do not. Women who have their Pap tests as often as they should are least likely to develop cervical cancer.

Your chances of developing cervical cancer increase if you:

- have the HPV that can cause cervix cancer and it doesn't go away
- have HIV or AIDS
- smoke

In addition to a Pap test, there is the HPV test. This test can be done at the same time as the Pap test, with a second swab. Some women with a certain type of abnormal Pap test will get an HPV test as part of their follow-up. If you think you might want to get an HPV test, you can get more information by calling your American Cancer Society at 1-800-ACS-2345.