



You can prevent cervical cancer through regular screening

Test options and why screening is so important

What is cervical cancer and why is screening important?

Cervical cancer is cancer in the cervix, the lower part of the uterus (womb) connected to the vagina. **The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection with a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV).**

HPV infection can change the cells of the cervix. It takes an average of 10 years for pre-cancerous cells to turn into cancer. **You can prevent cervical cancer by getting routine testing.** In most cases, screening can find pre-cancerous cells that can be removed before cancer forms. Screening can also find early-stage cervical cancer that can be successfully treated.

Did you know?

90% of people have had HPV

HPV infections can come and go

You should get tested even if you're not sexually active

What is HPV and how is it spread?

HPV is spread through all forms of sexual contact. Almost all people (90%) who've been sexually active have had HPV at some time in their life. Condoms do not completely protect against HPV. For most people, an HPV infection goes away on its own. However, when an HPV infection does not go away, it can change normal cervical cells into abnormal or pre-cancerous cells.

Most HPV infections, pre-cancerous cells, and early-stage cervical cancers do not have any symptoms. This is why it's so important to get screened regularly, even if you've been with the same partner, had only same-sex partners, or haven't been sexually active for many years. Routine screening is important even if you have a history of negative test results.

What options do I have for cervical cancer screening?

Two tests are used to screen for cervical cancer:

- **HPV tests** look for HPV infection that can cause pre-cancerous cells.
- **Pap tests** (also called Pap smears) look for abnormal cells on your cervix.

Traditionally for both tests, a doctor uses a speculum to open the vagina, insert a small brush, and collect cell samples. Recent studies have shown that HPV samples can be self-collected by an individual using a vaginal swab (Pap tests still require an office visit). The tests may be used alone or together, depending on your age and health history.

Women ages 30-65 can choose to screen with one of the following:

- Pap test every 3 years
- HPV test every 5 years
- HPV and Pap test (co-test) every 5 years

In the past, doctors recommended a Pap test every year. Because testing options have improved, tests can be done less often. Talk to your doctor about which option is best for you.



I had an abnormal Pap test 5 years after I was last sexually active. I'm so glad I got tested even though I didn't think I was at high risk. You can develop cervical cancer even if you have been with the same partner for a long time.

What happens if my screening test is abnormal or positive?

An abnormal Pap or positive HPV test result does not mean you have cancer. Your care team will use the test results along with your age and past screening history to decide on the best follow-up plan.

Follow-up could include:

- Having a Pap test in the clinic to look for abnormal cells (if you collected your first HPV sample yourself with a vaginal swab).
- Getting other tests, like a colposcopy that lets your doctor see your cervix more closely.

Additional procedures may be done to help diagnose and treat any concerning changes on your cervix. **Follow-up care is important for preventing cervical cancer and successfully treating early-stage cervical cancer.** Complete all follow-up appointments as instructed by your doctor.

Do I still need to be screened if I have had the HPV vaccine?

Yes, if you received the HPV vaccine, you still need regular cervical cancer screening up to age 65.

The vaccine is very effective at protecting against new HPV infections. However, the vaccine does not help get rid of an HPV infection already in your body. That is why it's important to start the vaccine series before being exposed to the virus.

The vaccine is recommended for children at ages 11-12 and can be given starting at age 9. It's also recommended up to age 26 for people who have not received the full series of shots. People aged 27-45, who did not get the vaccine when younger, may still benefit from it. Talk with your doctor if you have questions or visit the websites below to learn more.



I thought HPV was something for teens and not people my age - but I was tested, and I had a positive HPV test. Now my doctor and I know we need to make sure I am tested on a regular schedule to make sure I don't develop cervical cancer.

For more information:

Kaiser Permanente website

kp.org/wa/paptest

National Cancer Institute

cancer.gov/types/cervical
cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/infectious-agents/hpv-and-cancer

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/index.htm