

SCREENING FOR CERVICAL CANCER

Cervical cancer can be prevented. By taking the right steps now, you can avoid getting cervical cancer later. Cervical cancer can be cured when it is found early. If you are between 21 and 65 years old, you should be screened for cervical cancer. Depending on your age and health history, your doctor will use one or two tests. Each test looks for any signs of cervical cancer or the virus that causes it.

HEALTH NOTES



For more information

Visit kp.org/health

- You'll find a health encyclopedia with information about many health-related topics.

Call Kaiser Permanente Medical Advice

- Talk to your medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling (703) 359-7878 or 1-800-777-7904. If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call 711 or 1-800-201-7165. Ask the Relay Operator to dial 1-855-632-8278.

Your health can be seriously affected by violence or abuse. If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, there is help. Talk to your doctor or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (SAFE) or visit their website at thehotline.org.

What is cervical cancer?

Your body is made up of millions of tiny pieces called cells. There are good cells and bad cells in everyone's body. When some kinds of bad cells grow too much, cancer forms. Cervical cancer is cancer that starts on the cervix, the area between your vagina and your uterus. Cervical cancer begins when some of the bad cells that live on your cervix grow too much. A virus called **human papillomavirus (HPV)** can cause this to happen.

What is HPV?

HPV is a virus. A virus is a living thing. It is tiny – too small to see with your eyes – and it uses your body to survive. One of the places HPV can live is inside the cells that make up your cervix. HPV is the most common cause of cervical cancer. You can get HPV by having sex with someone who has it or by touching someone's infected area of skin with your skin. Condoms only shield the skin they cover. They cannot completely prevent you from coming in contact with the virus.

There are many types of HPV, and some types are more likely than others to cause cervical cancer. These types of HPV are called "high-risk." Some "low-risk" types of HPV can cause genital warts, but do not cause cervical cancer. Your body's immune system usually gets rid of HPV within 9 to 12 months. Sometimes though, a "high-risk" type of HPV does not go away on its own and can cause changes to the cells on your cervix. These changes are called **cervical dysplasia or pre-cancer**. Cervical dysplasia is not cancer, but it can lead to cancer if it is not treated.

How do I get screened for cervical cancer?

There are two kinds of tests that are used to screen for cervical cancer. One is the Pap test (also known as a Pap smear). The Pap test is used to look for problems that could lead to cancer in the cells of your cervix. The other test is an HPV test, and it looks for HPV in the cells of your cervix. Both tests can be done at the same time. During the tests, your doctor inserts a tool called a speculum into your vagina. The speculum gently opens your vagina so your doctor can see the cervix. Your doctor uses a small brush to collect some of the cells on your cervix. The cells are sent to a laboratory to be tested.

When should I be screened for cervical cancer?

Talk to your doctor about a screening plan that is right for you. If you have never had a Pap test or if the results of your Pap tests were normal, follow these recommendations:

Between the ages of 21 and 29:

- You should be screened for cervical cancer every three years with a Pap test.

Between the ages of 30 and 65:

- You should be screened for cervical cancer every five years with a Pap test and an HPV test.

Over the age of 65:

- You should not need to be screened for cervical cancer or HPV if:
 - » You were screened regularly before you turned 65; and
 - » You do not have any current or past health problems that would make it more likely that you would get cervical cancer.

Special cases

Total hysterectomy: A hysterectomy is surgery to take out the uterus. If you have had a total hysterectomy, including removal of your cervix, you do not need to be screened for cervical cancer or HPV, unless your hysterectomy was for cervical cancer or a pre-cancerous health problem.

Past abnormal Pap test: If you have had a Pap test in the past that showed cells on your cervix that were not normal, you may need to have cervical screening done more often.

Suppressed immune system: You may need more frequent screening if you have a suppressed immune system. This can be caused by the HIV infection, an organ transplant, or long-term steroid use. Always talk with your doctor about what screening plan is best for you.

What happens if my Pap test or HPV test is positive?

If your Pap test or HPV test is positive, that means that there are some cells on your cervix that are not normal. This does not usually mean that you have cervical cancer. It may mean that you have pre-cancer. Your doctor may ask you to come back for more testing. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to talk to your doctor.

Why shouldn't I be screened for cervical cancer more often than every 3 to 5 years?

Research has shown that women who do not have any risk factors for cervical cancer do not need to be screened more than every 3 to 5 years. Pap tests are very good at finding problem cells before they turn into cervical cancer. Cervical cancer cells grow slowly. Checking your cervix every 3 to 5 years gives your doctor enough time to find and treat any problems that come up.

Also, false positive results for Pap tests are not uncommon. Over-screening can lead to follow-up tests that are not necessary. Follow-up tests have side effects like bleeding. They may raise your risk of pre-term labor in future pregnancies. If you are screened every 3 to 5 years, your risk of getting cervical cancer is extremely low.

Is there a vaccine for HPV?

An HPV vaccine is now part of the recommended vaccination schedule for girls and boys. It is given as a series of three shots. The HPV vaccine works best if it is given long before there is any sexual contact, even skin-to-skin. The vaccine helps prevent four of the most common types of HPV. These four HPV types cause 70% of all cervical cancer and 90% of genital warts.

Girls may begin the vaccination series as early as age 9, but should definitely start by age 11 or 12. Girls between 13 and 18 should be vaccinated if they have not been already. Women between the ages of 18 and 26 may ask for the vaccine. For more information, talk to your doctor.

Can I avoid getting HPV or cervical cancer?

You can lower your chances of getting HPV by:

- getting the HPV vaccination,
- waiting to have sex until you are older,
- limiting the number of your sexual partners,
- using a condom every time,
- not having sex with someone who has had many sexual partners,
- if you smoke, quitting, and
- getting regular screening for cervical cancer.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent medical problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor or member of your health care team.