

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer starts in the cells of the cervix, which is found at the top of the vagina. Most cervical cancer is caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV) which can cause cervical cells to change from healthy to unhealthy. Having regular Pap tests can find cell changes that can be treated before they become cancerous.

Human papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of more than 100 different types of related viruses. HPV is very common; nearly all sexually active men and women will get at least one type of HPV at some point in their lives. Most people never know that they have been infected and may give HPV to a partner without knowing it. Long-term infection with some types of HPV can cause cell changes, and when left untreated can develop into cancer. The types of virus related to cervical cancer are usually found in and around genitals. It is most often passed between two people through sexual activity, but can be passed through other close skin-to-skin contact. HPV infection can also cause anal, vaginal, vulvar, penile and some mouth and throat cancers.

Signs and symptoms

Cervical cancer can develop over a long time without any signs or symptoms. A Pap test is the best way to find changes in the cells of the cervix. Symptoms do not always occur, but you may notice one or more of the following:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- Bleeding or spotting after sex
- Menstrual periods that last longer and are heavier than before
- Vaginal bleeding after menopause
- More discharge from the vagina than normal
- Pain in the pelvis or lower back
- Pain during sex

These signs and symptoms can also be caused by other health problems or infections. If you experience any of the above signs or symptoms it is important to see your health care provider.



Risk factors for HPV infection and cervical cancer

- Sexual activity now or in the past, becoming sexually active at a young age, having multiple sexual partners or a partner who has had many partners increases the risk of HPV infection
- Smoking and second-hand smoke exposure can affect how cells heal after an HPV infection
- Multiple births may reduce resistance to HPV infection due to cervical trauma during childbirth or hormone changes during pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as herpes or chlamydia can decrease your body's ability to fight an HPV infection
- Long-term use of birth control pills may affect the ability for cells to repair themselves following an HPV infection, or make it easier for cells to change that can become cancer
- Conditions, or medications that weaken your immune system can make it difficult for the body to fight an HPV infection
- Not having regular Pap tests to detect cervical cell changes before cancer develops

Ontario cervical screening guidelines

If you have ever been sexually active you should be screened through Pap testing starting at age 21 and continue until age 70. Pap tests should be done every three years. Talk to your health care provider for more information.

Reducing your risk

The best way to reduce your risk of being exposed to HPV is to delay sexual activity. If you are sexually active, which includes sexual intercourse, genital skin-to-skin contact and oral sex you can reduce your risk if you:

- Get vaccinated for HPV
- Limit the number of sexual partners
- Choose a partner who has not had many sexual partners
- Use a condom. Using a condom will reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of HPV infection
- Have a regular Pap test starting at age 21, then every three years

The HPV vaccine can prevent some types of HPV infection and is available for both males and females. If sexually active and over the age of 21, vaccinated women still need to have a Pap test every three years as the vaccine does not protect against all HPV types. HPV vaccines available in Canada are Gardasil, Cervarix and Gardasil 9. The vaccines work best when given to young people before they become sexually active. To assess your cancer risk visit [My Cancer IQ](#)

For more information on cervical cancer, cancer screening, or cancer prevention talk to your health care provider or contact York Region at 1-800-361-5653, TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit york.ca/health

