



Original link: <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/CervicalCancer/>

Cervical Cancer: The Preventable Gynecologic Cancer



Most cases of cervical cancer are easily preventable with regular screening tests and follow-up. It also is highly curable when found and treated early. Now vaccines are available to protect against the most common cause of cervical cancer.

The main cause of cervical cancer is human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. HPV also causes other cancers, including vaginal, vulvar, anal, penile, and a few head and neck (oropharyngeal) cancers. At least half of sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives.



Most of the time, HPV goes away by itself within two years and does not cause health problems. The immune system can fight off HPV naturally. If the body

does not clear the virus, it stays in the body for many years before it causes these cancers. It is not known why HPV goes away in most, but not all, cases.

Screening Tests

Two tests can help prevent cervical cancer or find it early—

- The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for precancers, which are cell changes on the cervix that might become cervical cancer if they are not treated appropriately.
- The HPV test looks for the virus that can cause these cell changes.

The Pap test is recommended for women between the ages of 21 and 65, and can be done in a doctor's office or clinic. Women should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21. If your Pap test results are normal, your doctor may tell you that you can wait three years until your next Pap test. If you are aged 30 years or older, you may choose to have an HPV test along with the Pap test. Both tests can be performed by your doctor at the same time. When both tests are performed together, it is called co-testing. If your test results are normal, your chance of getting cervical cancer in the next few years is very low. Your doctor may then tell you that you can wait as long as five years for your next screening.

If you have a low income or do not have health insurance, you may be able to get a free or low-cost Pap test through CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program. [Find out if you qualify.](#)

HPV Vaccines

HPV vaccines protect against the types of HPV that most commonly cause cervical cancer. Two HPV vaccines are licensed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and recommended by CDC. These vaccines are Gardasil® (made by Merck) and Cervarix® (made by GlaxoSmithKline). Both vaccines are very effective against HPV types 16 and 18, which cause most cervical cancers. So both vaccines prevent cervical cancer and precancer in women.

CDC recommends that all girls and boys who are 11 or 12 years old get three doses (shots) of either brand of HPV vaccine to protect against cervical cancer and precancer. Gardasil® also protects against most genital warts.

HPV vaccines are recommended for all teen girls and women through age 26, who did not get all three doses of the vaccine when they were younger.

Although boys are not at risk of cervical cancer, vaccinating boys is likely to slow the spread of the types of HPV that can cause cancer. HPV vaccines are recommended for all teen boys and men through age 21, who did not get all three doses of the vaccine when they were younger. The vaccine also is recommended for gay and bisexual men (or any man who has sex with men) and men with compromised immune systems (including HIV) through age 26, if they did not get fully vaccinated when they were younger. All men may get the vaccine through age 26, and should ask their doctor if getting vaccinated is right for them.

Most health insurance plans cover the cost of vaccines, but you may want to check with your insurance provider before going to the doctor. If you don't have insurance, or if it does not cover vaccines, the [Vaccines for Children \(VFC\) program](#) may be able to help. Through this program, children younger than 19 years of age who are Medicaid-eligible, American Indian or Alaska Native, or have no health insurance can receive vaccines at reduced cost.

More Steps to Help Prevent Cervical Cancer

These things may also help lower your risk for cervical cancer—

- Don't smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.*
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

*HPV infection can occur in both male and female genital areas that are covered or protected by a latex condom, as well as in areas that are not covered.