

# Five tips for preventing cervical cancer

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Silent but deadly. These are words often used to describe cervical cancer—a slow-growing disease that rarely causes symptoms in its early stages.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, each year more than 11,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and for some it will be too late to receive effective treatment.

## **What causes cervical cancer?**

Cervical cancer is almost always caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV)—the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. Affecting approximately 79 million Americans, HPV can be detected in 93 percent of all cervical cancers.

Yet the virus alone is not sufficient to cause cervical cancer. Other contributing factors include the following:

- Smoking
- Poor nutrition
- A weakened immune system
- Pregnancy

"HPV is very common; up to 80 percent of sexually active people have been exposed at some point in their lives," says Summer Dewdney, MD, a gynecologic oncologist at Rush University Medical Center. "But the vast majority never develop any symptoms, and the body's immune system can usually clear HPV on its own within two years."

In some women, however, certain strains of HPV cause changes to the cells in the cervix, which then can become cancerous.

Here, Dewdney offers five tips for reducing your risk of cervical cancer:

### **1. Go for routine Pap tests.**

Pap tests enable doctors to detect abnormalities—changes on the cells on your cervix—and take action before cervical cancer develops.

"Women should have a Pap test at least once every three years, beginning at age 21," Dewdney says. "Once you turn 30, we recommend pap smears every five years as long as you have HPV testing with your Pap and the results are negative."

"In addition, any bleeding with intercourse should be evaluated by a gynecologist," she adds.

According to the American Cancer Society, between 60 and 80 percent of women in the United States with newly diagnosed [invasive cervical cancer](#) have not had a Pap test in the past five years. And, even more alarming, many of these women have never had the exam.

## **2. Follow up on abnormal Pap smears.**

If an infection is present, your doctor will treat you and repeat the Pap test at a later time. If the examination or Pap test suggests something other than an infection, your doctor will perform other tests to determine the problem.

In some cases where women had prior abnormal Pap test results, doctors may also perform an HPV DNA test, which can detect HPV on a woman's cervix.

## **3. Get vaccinated.**

"We have a vaccine for cancer," Dewdney says. "Use it!"

Two vaccines, Cervarix and Gardasil, are available to protect against the

types of HPV that cause the most cervical cancers, as well as anal cancers in men. Your doctor can administer the vaccine in three shots over a six-month period.

- Gardasil is recommended for girls and women between the ages of nine and 26
- Cervarix is recommended for girls who are nine years of age, plus women of any age who have not previously been vaccinated and have not previously been diagnosed with cervical cancer.
- The HPV vaccine is also recommended for boys, starting at age 11.

"If you aren't eligible but your children are the right ages, consider taking them to be vaccinated," Dewdney says. "But the important thing to know is that even if you were not vaccinated as a child, you can still get the vaccine up to age 26."

#### **4. Practice safe sex.**

Studies have shown that [women](#) who have many sexual partners increase their risk of developing HPV and their risk of cervical cancer.

"And if you are sexually active, use a condom every time you have sex," Dewdney adds. "Unprotected sex leaves you at risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases that can increase your risk of getting HPV and greatly increase your chances of developing precancerous changes of the cervix."

But while condoms help to lower the risk of developing HPV-related diseases, including cervical cancer, be aware that HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom, so condoms may not fully protect against HPV. That's why it's essential get the HPV vaccine in addition to using condoms.

## 5. Quit smoking.

Smoking cigarettes doubles your risk of developing cervical cancer. Studies have shown that tobacco by-products damage the DNA of cervix cells and may contribute to the development of [cervical cancer](#).

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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