

Q&A: What's the connection between HPV and cervical cancer?

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Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers, yet more than 14,000 women in the U.S. will be diagnosed with the disease this year, according to the American Cancer Society. Cervical cancer is often

stigmatized due to its association with human papilloma virus (HPV), a sexually transmitted infection, however, HPV is extremely common, affecting most adults. Some people may also feel uncomfortable asking their doctor about sexual health. When it comes to ending the stigma, information is key—and your doctor can help answer your questions—even if you feel embarrassed.

James K. Aikins, Jr., MD, FACOG, FACS, chief of Gynecologic Oncology at Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey and associate professor of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, answers questions about cervical cancer and HPV that you might be embarrassed to ask.

What's the connection between HPV and cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is almost always caused by HPV, which nearly every sexually active person will be exposed to in their lifetime. People with healthy immune systems are able to clear the virus within one to two years, but when high-risk strains infect specific cells of the cervix it can lead to abnormal cell growth and precancerous changes. Over time and with persistent infection, this can lead to cervical cancer.

How do I prevent cervical cancer?

An effective vaccine is available for both males and females starting at age 9 to prevent cancers caused by HPV infections. Regular Pap tests and testing for HPV can detect precancerous changes that occur in cells and can eventually become cervical cancer. Women between the ages of 21 and 65 are typically screened, but the frequency varies depending on age and other factors.

Should I continue to get screened if I've had the HPV vaccine?

Yes. It's important to continue getting screened for cervical cancer, even if you and your partner have had the HPV vaccine.

What if I'm too embarrassed to get a cervical screening or Pap test?

If you're nervous about your Pap test, you are not alone, but it's important to remember that a few minutes of potential discomfort can save your life. Also, remember that your doctor is not judging you—their main concern is your health.

If I have an abnormal Pap, does this mean I have cervical cancer?

Although abnormal Pap results can seem scary, abnormal results don't necessarily mean you have cervical cancer.

What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

Early cervical cancer usually has no clear warning signs. Symptoms don't often begin to show until cancer becomes larger and spreads to nearby organs or tissue. Symptoms can include abnormal vaginal bleeding, heavy periods and pain in or around your pelvic region.

Is cervical cancer contagious?

Cervical [cancer](#) is not contagious, so women who have [cervical cancer](#) do not need to worry about spreading the disease. However, HPV is

contagious and may cause other cancers in the anus, penis, vagina and back of the throat. Since high-risk strains of the virus don't present with any symptoms, a woman or man may not know they have a current infection, thus it is important for [women](#) to undergo regular screening.

Provided by Rutgers University

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