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Cervical Cancer

How to reduce your risk



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Cervical Cancer

How to reduce your risk

Cervical cancer *can* be prevented. You don't hear bold statements like that very often when it comes to cancer. But it's true. Having a Pap test could save your life.

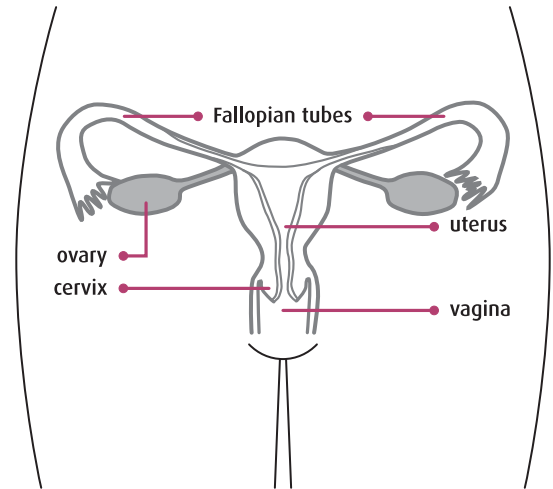
Having a Pap test is never going to top your list of "favourite things to do", but think about these numbers:

- The cervical cancer rate in Canada has gone down by 50% since 1977.
- The cervical cancer death rate in Canada has gone down by 60% since 1977.

An important reason that these numbers have been going down since the seventies is that women have been getting Pap tests regularly. This screening test helps find early changes in the cervix *before* they develop into cancer. Even with the new HPV vaccine, regular Pap tests are still needed.

First, the biology lesson

We'll keep this short! The cervix is the narrow passageway that connects the uterus (or womb) to the vagina. It's part of your reproductive system, which also includes your ovaries and Fallopian tubes.



Cervical cancer usually grows very slowly. Before cervical cancer develops, the cells of the cervix start to change and become abnormal. These abnormal cells are not cancer, but they may develop into cancer. The name for these precancerous changes to the cervix is *dysplasia of the cervix*, or *cervical dysplasia*. It's not a popular topic of conversation, but many women have had dysplasia - having it doesn't mean you have cancer.

Sometimes the dysplasia cells go back to normal on their own. But some cells are more likely to develop into cancer and will

need to be treated quickly. If you have dysplasia, your doctor will talk to you about whether to treat it right away or whether to wait and monitor the situation.

Who gets cervical cancer?

If you're a woman, and you've had sex, you can get cervical cancer.

Women of all ages and backgrounds, and any sexual orientation, are at risk of cervical cancer. In most cases, cervical cancer doesn't develop until you're in your 30s or 40s, but it can also develop in women in their 20s.

Sex can lead to ... cancer?

We probably don't need to tell you that being sexually active has its risks, but – cancer?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the major cause of the problem. HPVs are a group of viruses that live on the skin and can be passed easily from person to person through skin-to-skin contact with any HPV-infected area of the body. It's spread mainly through sexual contact (including sexual intercourse, genital skin-to-skin contact and oral sex).

If you're sexually active, you've likely been exposed to HPV at some point in your life. HPV infection is most common among younger women.

HPV infections usually go away without treatment, because the immune system gets rid of the virus. Only certain types of HPV can cause changes to cells in the cervix that may lead to cervical cancer.

You are at higher risk for cervical cancer if you:

- don't have regular Pap tests
- became sexually active at a young age
- have had many sexual partners or a sexual partner who has had many partners
- smoke
- have used birth control pills for a long time (usually more than 5 years)

Having risk factors for a type of cancer doesn't mean you *will* develop it. It means that your *chances* of developing it are higher. But doesn't it still make sense to do what you can to avoid it?

Anything else to be aware of?

There are other risk factors for cervical cancer, although they don't apply to that many women. For example, if you have a weakened immune system (perhaps from taking drugs to prevent organ rejection after a transplant or having a disease such as AIDS), you may be at higher risk. Women with HPV who give birth to 7 or more children are also at increased risk for cervical cancer.

Don't avoid it – have a Pap test

So, what's a girl to do? If you've ever had sex (and that means *any* kind of sexual activity or genital skin-to-skin contact, including oral sex), you should have regular Pap tests. Pap tests are also called *Pap smears*. Your doctor will recommend how often to have them. It's usually every 1 to 3 years (this timing often depends on your previous test results). Even if you have stopped having sex, you should continue to have a Pap test.

It's not too late for the test

If you've been sexually active for a while but have never had a test, or haven't had one in years, it's not too late. Schedule one as soon as you can. Even if you stop having sex, you should still have Pap tests.

The test can be done in your doctor's office. It can also be provided by nurses and other healthcare professionals at a public health clinic.

Have the test even if you feel fine. There are no symptoms of HPV infection and early changes in the cervix. The Pap test is a *screening* test, which means it checks for signs of disease even before you've noticed anything that might be a problem. The Pap test helps find dysplasia and cervical cancer at its earliest, most treatable stages.

No screening test for cancer is 100% accurate. While no test is perfect, a Pap test could save your life.

What happens during a Pap test

If you've never had a Pap test, they're really not that bad. It shouldn't hurt, but you might find it kind of uncomfortable. You have to lie down with your knees drawn up and spread apart so that a medical instrument can be put in your vagina. Try to stay relaxed, because being tense can also make it uncomfortable. Taking deep breaths may help. It's not easy, but you'll figure out what helps you get through the test – staring at a picture on the wall, counting the ceiling tiles, wondering why the person doing the test keeps on chatting.

During the test, a *speculum* (a clear plastic or metal device) is gently put into the vagina to widen it so that the doctor or nurse can see the upper part of the vagina and the cervix. Then the doctor uses a small wooden stick or spatula to gently scrape the surface of the lower part of the cervix to pick up cells. A special brush is used to get cells from the upper part of the cervix. The sample of cells is sent to a laboratory to be examined under a microscope.

There may be some slight bleeding (or spotting) from the vagina for a day or two after the Pap test.

Some do's and don'ts on Pap tests

- **Do** try to have the Pap test in the middle part of your menstrual cycle – that means between 10 and 20 days after the first day of your period.
- **Don't** use vaginal douches, vaginal medications, contraceptive (spermicidal) creams, foams or jellies (unless your doctor tells you to) in the 48 hours before the test.
- **Don't** have sex in the 24 hours before the test.

If your Pap test shows a change or anything abnormal, you may have some follow-up tests, such as another Pap test, an HPV test or a biopsy.

Pelvic examination

When you have a Pap test, you might also have a pelvic exam. It doesn't check for cervical cancer, but may uncover other problems. During this test, your doctor inserts a gloved finger into the vagina to check the cervix and pelvic organs (such as the uterus, ovaries and Fallopian tubes) while gently pressing on the lower abdomen with the other hand. You may feel some pressure, but it's not usually painful.

Reduce your risk

Having regular Pap tests is a key way to reduce your risk and prevent cervical cancer. But there's more you can do.

Do what you can to avoid an HPV infection

The only sure way to prevent an HPV infection is to completely avoid any genital contact with another person. If you're sexually active and you're worried about HPV and cervical cancer, you can reduce your risk by:

- having as few sexual partners as possible
- being in a monogamous relationship with someone who has also had as few sexual partners as possible
- using condoms

Using a condom can reduce HPV infection if it is put on *before* skin-to-skin sexual contact. But there's only so much a condom can do. Areas not covered by a condom still allow some skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. So using condoms will reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of HPV infection.

Think about whether the HPV vaccine is right for you

The HPV vaccine is for girls and women between the ages of 9 and 26. It protects against some HPV infections that cause more than 70% of cervical cancer cases and most types of genital warts. The vaccine works best if you have it before you've been exposed to HPV. This means *before* you become sexually active. (The vaccine may have some benefit for young women in the recommended age group who are already sexually active.)

Getting the vaccine doesn't guarantee that you won't develop cervical cancer. It doesn't protect against all HPV infections and you still need to have regular Pap tests. Talk to your doctor if you'd like to know more about the vaccine.

Live smoke-free

You already know that smoking makes your hair and clothes stink, causes wrinkles and can lead to lung cancer. You may *not* know that being a smoker and being around second-hand smoke has also been linked to dysplasia and cervical cancer. The longer you smoke, and the more cigarettes you smoke per day, the more you may increase your risk.

Talk to your doctor about your risk

All women should talk to their doctor about their risk of developing cervical cancer. Your doctor can:

- help you understand what risk factors you have
- suggest what you can do to try to change them
- tell you more about the screening guidelines where you live

Report changes to your doctor

Even if you're having Pap tests regularly, don't ignore changes to your body. Change doesn't always mean a serious health problem, but it could be a sign of dysplasia or cancer. It's important to get symptoms checked out, no matter how busy you are – don't let a small health concern turn into a major health problem. See your doctor if you have:

- abnormal bleeding from the vagina
 - > bleeding or spotting between your periods
 - > bleeding after sex
 - > periods that last longer and are heavier than before
 - > bleeding after menopause
- more discharge from the vagina than normal
- pain in the pelvis or lower back
- pain during sexual intercourse

Your doctor may suggest a pelvic examination and Pap test. These may need to be followed up with other tests.

Find out more

Now that you know the basics about reducing your risk of cervical cancer, you might want to keep up with the latest research, learn more about HPV or the vaccine, or find a screening program close to home. We can help:

- Call an information specialist toll-free at **1 888 939-3333** Monday to Friday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- E-mail us at **info@cis.cancer.ca**.
- Visit our website at **www.cancer.ca**.



We'd like to hear from you

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What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

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