

# **The Who, What, Where, When and How of Cervical Cancer, HPV & the HPV Vaccine**

## **What is cervical cancer and how can I avoid getting it?**

Cervical cancer is cancer that begins in the cervix, the part of the womb (or uterus) that opens into the vagina. Cervical cancer is caused by a virus called HPV (human papillomavirus).<sup>1</sup> This virus can cause cervical cancer. The only way to avoid it is to not have sexual intercourse. You can reduce your chances by not having sex too early, having one partner who is only with you and having regular exams. Using a condom whenever you have sex can also be helpful but not 100%.

## **What is a Pap smear or Pap test and how is it done?**

A Pap smear is a test your provider does to check for early changes in the cervix that might lead to cancer.<sup>2</sup> A Pap smear is simple and quick. During a Pap smear your provider will open your vagina with an instrument called a speculum, next they will use a small soft brush to take a few cells from your cervix.<sup>3</sup> This test only takes a few seconds and does not hurt. The cells are then put on a slide and sent to a lab. During this time your provider will most likely also do a pelvic exam. This is when the provider checks your outside genital area and also checks the shape and size of your internal organs to make sure they feel normal. This does not hurt.

## **When should a woman have a Pap test and how often?**

A Pap test is done about three years after you become sexually active but no later than when you turn 21.<sup>4</sup> After that your provider will tell you how often you should come back, usually every year until you turn 30. If you are over 30 and have had three normal Pap tests in a row, then you can have a Pap test every 2-3 years. It is very important to continue to be screened and checked even if you have no symptoms.

## **What do the Pap test results mean and what happens if the results are not normal?**

Paps that are not normal are usually caused by HPV.<sup>5</sup> Your provider will explain what other tests you might need. If you have HPV and a normal Pap test, this means only that you have the HPV virus. You will most likely be tested again in 6 to 12 months to see if the virus has gone away. If not, other tests may be needed.

## **What is HPV and what kind of symptoms does it have?**

HPV stands for Human Papillomavirus. It is the most common sexually transmitted virus in the US. Sometimes HPV has no symptoms at all or you may notice skin colored warts in or around your genital area.<sup>6</sup> A Pap test that is not normal can be the first sign of a possible HPV infection. HPV is often the cause of cervical cancer. Once you have HPV it cannot be cured but often times the virus can go away on it's own. About 90% of HPV infections are gone within two years. During this time you can still spread HPV.

## **Who can get HPV?**

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<sup>1</sup> American Cancer Society: What Every Woman Should Know About Cervical Cancer and the Human Papillomavirus; [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

<sup>2</sup> American Academy of Family Physicians: Pap Smears: What They Are and What the Results Mean; <http://familydoctor.org/138.xml?printxml>

<sup>3</sup> National Cancer Institute; Pap Tests and Cervical Health: A Healthy Habit for You; [www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pap-tests-cervical-health](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pap-tests-cervical-health)

<sup>4</sup> American Cancer Society: Can Cervical Cancer Be Prevented? [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

<sup>5</sup> The Center for Young Women's Health – Children's Hospital Boston: Abnormal Pap Tests: A Guide for Teens.

<sup>6</sup> American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology: <http://cme/asccp.org/faq/histHPV.cfm>

Anyone who is sexually active can get HPV<sup>7</sup>. The most common way is from oral, vaginal or anal sex with someone who has this infection. You can even get HPV from skin to skin genital contact with a partner without having sexual intercourse. You have a greater chance of getting HPV if you start having sexual intercourse at an early age, you or your partner have had many other partners or your partner does not wear a condom.

### **Is there a test for HPV? When and why is it done?**

Yes, there is a test called the HPV test. Some women (over 30) may have an HPV test at the same time as their Pap test with a second swab.<sup>8</sup> Some women who may have a Pap test that is not normal will have an HPV test as part of their follow-up. In this case it doesn't matter how old the woman is. The test is done to see if the HPV virus is present. If it is, your provider will discuss with you the various options you have.

### **What can a teen or adult woman do to protect herself against HPV?**

The safest way to not get HPV is to not have sex. If you are having sex, it is important to reduce your chances by only having one partner who only has sex with you<sup>9</sup>. Using condoms gives you some protection but don't always prevent infection since a condom does not cover the scrotum (the area where the testicles are located). You can also ask for the new HPV Vaccine called Gardasil. This new vaccine protects against the most common HPV viruses that cause cervical cancer<sup>10</sup>. Your provider will know if this vaccine is right for you. The new vaccine is an important tool in the fight against cervical cancer.

For more information related to cervical cancer, HPV or the HPV vaccine, check out the following FAQ Sheets.

Cervical Cancer FAQ Sheet  
Cervical Cancer  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/statistics/](http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/statistics/)

HPV FAQ Sheet –  
Genital HPV Infection, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/std/HPV/STDFact-HPV.htm#Whatis>

HPV Vaccine FAQ Sheet –  
Centers for Disease Control & Prevention  
National Immunization Program  
HPV Vaccine Q & A  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/vaccine/hpv/hpv-faqs.htm#1>

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<sup>7</sup> The Center for Young Women's Health-Children's Hospital Boston: Human Papillomavirus (HPV): A Guide for Teens [www.youngwomenshealth.org](http://www.youngwomenshealth.org)

<sup>8</sup> American Cancer Society: Thinking About Testing for HPV? [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

<sup>9</sup> The Center for Young Women's Health-Children's Hospital Boston: Human Papillomavirus (HPV): A Guide for Teens [www.youngwomenshealth.org](http://www.youngwomenshealth.org)

<sup>10</sup> American Cancer Society: Frequently Asked Questions about Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) Vaccines