

Cervical Cancer Screening

Cervical screening is important because it can find early changes in the cervix that could lead to cancer. Catching these changes early allows for treatment before they become cancer, which helps prevent serious health problems later on.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

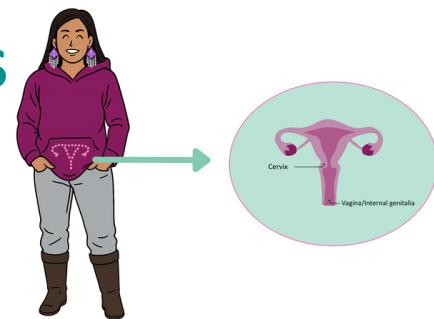
What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer begins in the cells of the cervix, or the lower part of the uterus which is connected to the vagina/internal genitalia. It happens when these cells start to change and grow into a cancerous lesion or tumour, which can spread to other parts of the body. Cervical cancer can happen to any individual with a cervix, who is, or has had sexual contact.

Most cervical cancers are caused by something called the human papillomavirus, or HPV.

What is HPV?

HPV is a group of viruses that are classified as either low, or high-risk. These viruses are spread through intimate skin-to-skin contact, including oral sex, genital contact, digital sex (finger), penetrative sex. HPV is considered the most common sexually transmitted infection, with 80% of people who have had sexual contact becoming infected with an HPV virus at some point in their lifetime. Most people who get HPV will never know they have it because their body's immune system will usually clear the virus before it causes any problems. It is when a high-risk type of HPV virus stays in the body for too long, often 10+ years, that it can begin to cause changes to the cells of the cervix. **Symptoms of cervical cancer may only be noticed once these changes to the cells have already occurred.**



Who should be screened for Cervical Cancer?

Women, non-binary, Two Spirit, transgender, or intersex and gender-diverse individuals with a cervix who are over the age 25 who are, or ever had sexual contact. Screening tests for the HPV virus and is recommended every 3 years.

****Those who have received the HPV vaccination should still be screened****

What are the symptoms of Cervical Cancer

Cervical screening is for individuals who have no symptoms of cervical cancer. Early stages of cervical cancer can have no or subtle symptoms. Below are symptoms that may appear once changes to the cells of the cervix have already happened.

If you do notice any of the below symptoms, you should see your healthcare provider right away and not wait:

- Abnormal genital bleeding (genital bleeding that is not normal for you, between your period/monthly bleeding, after menopause, or after sex)
- Abnormal or increased amount of genital discharge (change in genital discharge that is not normal for you)
- Foul-smelling genital discharge
- Unusually long or heavy period/monthly bleeding
- Pain during sexual contact
- Difficulty peeing or pooping
- Pain in the pelvic area or lower back

Who should NOT be screened for Cervical Cancer?

- Anyone who has never had sexual contact
- Anyone who has never had a cervix

Please speak to a healthcare provider if:

- you are experiencing any symptoms listed above, as you may require a different test, or
- If you've had your cervix removed for any reason

Why should I be screened?

Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by high-risk HPV and those infected with the virus generally have no symptoms. It is important to find out if you are at risk for developing or have developed abnormal cells. Finding and treating abnormal cells early can help to prevent cervical cancer.

Cervix self-screening uses HPV testing to look for HPV in your vagina/internal genitalia. HPV testing does not need a sample from your cervix. This can be done by yourself or your healthcare provider.

What if my cervical screening HPV test is abnormal/positive?

An abnormal/positive HPV test does not mean that you have or will develop cancer, but it does mean you need follow-up with a healthcare provider. Depending on your result, you will need a follow-up Papanicolaou (Pap) test or colposcopy.

Regardless of your result, you will receive a phone call from a healthcare provider to talk about next steps. If you have not been contacted about your results within 4 weeks (1 month), follow-up with your healthcare provider.

What is a Pap test?

A Papanicolaou Test, also known as a Pap test, is completed by a trained healthcare provider. A Pap test can detect changes in the cells of the cervix. The healthcare provider places a device called a speculum into your vagina/internal genitalia to look at the cervix. Using a small swab, spatula, or brush, cells are gently removed from the surface of your cervix. The test takes just a few minutes and may be uncomfortable but should not be painful. The removed cervix cells are sent to the lab to be examined. They will look either normal, or abnormal.

Pap test results take about 2-3 weeks to be returned to the healthcare provider who will contact you to let you know the results and what follow-up is needed. If you have not been contacted about your results within 4 weeks (1 month), follow-up with your healthcare provider.

What is a colposcopy?

A colposcopy is a medical examination, done by a specialized doctor to have a closer look at your cervix. It can also be used to look at your vagina/internal genitalia and vulva/external genitalia. Just like a Pap test, the doctor will place a speculum in your vagina/internal genitalia to view the cervix, which they will look at through the colposcope, which is a microscope with higher magnification.

The doctor may apply a liquid which makes any abnormal cells easier to see in the cervix. If any suspicious or abnormal cells are seen, a small sample of tissue, called a biopsy, may be collected. A biopsy feels like a small pinch, which all individuals will experience differently. For some it may cause mild cramping that should go away quickly. **Speak to your healthcare provider about whether they recommend taking a pain reliever such as Ibuprofen or Tylenol prior to your colposcopy appointment.**

The colposcopy is usually done in about 15 minutes.

If a tissue sample is collected during your colposcopy, it will be sent to the lab to be examined. Results take about 2 weeks to be returned to the healthcare provider who will contact you to let you know the results and what follow-up is needed. If you have not been contacted about your results within 4 weeks (1 month), follow-up with your healthcare provider.

What do I do if I have questions about my safety and wellbeing during the Pap test or Colposcopy procedure?

Along with guidance for people with gender dysphoria, PTSD, or other concerns about these procedures, the test is yours and you are in control. You can ask your healthcare provider to stop at any time, and you are encouraged to ask questions before, during, and after the procedure. If you feel pain during the procedure, let the healthcare provider/doctor know right away.

For more information,
please discuss with your healthcare provider or visit: cancernwt.ca

