

# cervical cancer

protect yourself: know the facts

## What is cervical cancer?

The cervix is part of a woman's reproductive system. It is the lower part of the uterus, or womb. Cervical cancer starts when cells that are not normal grow inside the cervix.

## What causes cervical cancer?

- Having one of the human papilloma viruses (HPV). Certain types of these viruses cause almost all cervical cancers. The viruses spread through sexual and skin-to-skin contact. Most women who have an HPV virus do not get cervical cancer, but having a high-risk type of HPV virus increases your risk of getting cervical cancer.
- Having many sexual partners.
- Smoking cigarettes.
- Having many pregnancies.
- Using birth control pills for five years or longer.

## What are the symptoms?

There usually are no symptoms of cervical cancer at first. When the cancer is more advanced, the most common symptom is abnormal bleeding from the vagina.

## What is screening?

Screening means looking for signs of disease before symptoms appear. Health care

providers look for signs of cervical cancer with a Pap test, also called a Pap smear. In this test, a health care provider removes some cells from the cervix. The test takes only a few seconds and is usually painless. The cells are checked in a lab for signs of cancer.

## Why is screening important?

The Pap test can find cells that are not normal before they become cancer. It also can find cervical cancer early, when it is easiest to treat. Cervical cancer is almost 100 percent curable when found early.

## When should women begin having Pap tests?

Women should begin having Pap tests when they reach age 21. Most women should have the test at least once every three years. With an adequate screening history, women may stop screening once they reach age 65. Additionally, if you have had a complete hysterectomy for **noncancerous** reasons you can stop having Pap smears. Talk with your doctor about what is right for you.

## What if I can't afford the test?

As a result of the Affordable Care Act, most insurance plans cover cervical cancer screening tests for women age 21 and older. For more detailed information, view the ACA and Cancer Health Professional and Public



Factsheets available at [www.kycancer.org](http://www.kycancer.org). If you do not have insurance, the Kentucky Women's Cancer Screening Program (KWCSPP) may help. Contact your local health department or call the KWCSPP at 1-502-564-3236. Additionally, most insurance plans also cover HPV vaccinations for females and males aged 11-26.

### How can I lower my chance of getting cervical cancer?

- Have regular Pap tests. The HPV test may be used along with the Pap test.
- Get the HPV vaccine if age appropriate.
- Avoid contact with HPV. Waiting until you are older and limiting number of sexual partners can reduce your chances of getting HPV. Using condoms also offers some protection against HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke.

### Where can I get more information?

For information about cancer resources in your community, call your local Kentucky Cancer Program office. For contact information, visit our website at [www.kycancerprogram.org](http://www.kycancerprogram.org).

For information on all types of cancer, call the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service at **1-800-4-CANCER** or go to [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov); or call the American Cancer Society at **1-800-ACS-2345** or visit [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

[www.kycancerprogram.org](http://www.kycancerprogram.org)

Kentucky Cancer Program

University of Kentucky/Markey Cancer Center

### What is the HPV vaccine?

The HPV (human papilloma virus) vaccine can help prevent the HPV virus and other changes that may lead to cervical cancer in women, penile cancer in men, and cancers of the anus, mouth, and throat as well as genital warts in both men and women.

The vaccine consists of three shots given over six months. It is recommended for both boys and girls between the ages 11 and 26.

Women who get the vaccine should continue having regular Pap tests.

Contact your doctor or local health department for more information.

*This fact sheet was developed by the Kentucky Cancer Program at the University of Kentucky Markey Cancer Center. The information comes from the National Cancer Institute, the American Cancer Society, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

*Last reviewed May 2015*

