

# 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?

Certain types of human papillomaviruses (HPV) cause almost all cervical cancers. The viruses spread through various forms of 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 the disease.

## 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?

Most cancer screenings are covered by insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid. Additionally, most insurance plans also cover HPV vaccinations for females and males aged 11-26. For more detailed information, view the ACA and Cancer Health Professional and Public Factsheets available at [www.kycancerc.org](http://www.kycancerc.org).

If you do not have insurance, the Kentucky Women's Cancer Screening



Program (KWCSP) may help. Call the KWCSP at 844-249-0708.

### 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.
- **Avoid contact with HPV.** Waiting until you are older for sexual activity and limiting the number of sexual partners can reduce your chances of getting HPV. Using condoms also offers some protection against HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Get the HPV vaccine if you are between the ages of 11 and 26.
- Don't smoke. Smoking nearly doubles your chance of getting cervical cancer compared to nonsmokers.

### Where can I get more information?

KCP's online tool, **Pathfinder**, can link you to cancer support and services nearest you. Visit [www.kycancerprogram.org](http://www.kycancerprogram.org) to find cancer resources in your community, or to contact your local **Kentucky Cancer Program** office.

For information on all types of cancer, contact:

- **National Cancer Institute, 1-800-4-CANCER, [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)**
- **American Cancer Society, 1-800-ACS-2345, [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)**

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

The Kentucky Cancer Program is jointly administered by the University of Kentucky Markey Cancer Center and the University of Louisville Brown Cancer Center.

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)**

### 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 2-3 shots given over a period of several months. It is recommended for both boys and girls between the ages 9 and 26, and some adults 27-45 who were not adequately vaccinated.

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

Contact your health care provider 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.*

*Revised January 2020*

