

# How to Prevent Cervical Cancer

## What causes cervical cancer?

The cervix, or opening of the womb, is located deep in the vagina. Cancer of the cervix is caused by a common sexually transmitted infection called human papillomavirus (PAP-uh-LO-ma-vi-rus), or HPV. Most HPV infections do not cause symptoms and go away in a few years without treatment. But in some people, HPV infection can eventually lead to cancer.

There are more than 100 different types of HPV. Most are low-risk types that can cause genital warts, but not cervical cancer. High-risk types are much more likely to cause precancer or cancer.

## How do I know if I have cervical cancer?

You should have a Pap test every three years once you turn 21. Your doctor will take cells from the cervix to be looked at under a microscope.

## Can I be tested for HPV?

Most people who have HPV do not have symptoms. Women 30 years and older can have HPV and Pap tests done at the same time. There are no HPV tests for men.

## What can I do to prevent cervical cancer?

The only sure way to avoid HPV infection is to not have sex. If you do have sex, limit your number of partners. There is no way to know if a new sex partner has an HPV infection. Using condoms every time you have sex can help reduce your risk, but it does not prevent all infections.

Tobacco use increases the risk of HPV infection, so if you smoke, you should quit.

There are two vaccines that decrease the risk of getting HPV and cervical cancer. Cervarix helps prevent cervical cancer from two high-risk HPV types. Gardasil helps prevent cervical cancer caused by the same two high-risk HPV types, as well as genital warts caused by two low-risk types. These vaccines do not protect against all types of HPV or treat HPV if you are already infected. For this reason, it is best to get vaccinated before you have sex for the first time. It is also important to have Pap tests done regularly, even after you have been vaccinated.

## Who should get the vaccine?

Gardasil is approved for girls and women nine to 26 years of age for prevention of genital warts and cervical cancer. It is also approved for boys

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and men nine to 26 years of age for prevention of genital warts. Cervarix is approved for girls and women 10 to 25 years of age for prevention of cervical cancer. Pregnant women should not be vaccinated.

### Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org>

American Society for Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology

Web site: <http://www.asccp.org/hpv.shtml>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Web sites: <http://www.cdc.gov/hpv/> and  
<http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical>

National Cancer Institute

Web site: <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/HPV>

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### Notes:

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**This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.**

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