

## What Is Cervical Cancer?

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb). It extends into the vagina. Cancer of the cervix is a common cause of cancer among women. Thankfully, it is also very treatable when it is found early.

## What Causes Cervical Cancer?

Most cervical cancers are caused by specific viruses in a family of viruses called the human papilloma viruses (HPV). There are many different strains of HPV. Only some of them cause changes in the cells of the cervix, resulting in cervical cancer. Others may cause genital warts. Still others have no long term effects at all.

## How Is Cervical Cancer Diagnosed?

There are no outward physical symptoms of early cervical cancer. It can be detected early, though. Clinicians can examine the cervix and take a small sample of cells from it. Using a microscope, laboratories can determine whether the cells are normal or show signs of change.

Not all abnormal cells found using a pap smear are cancer, although some may develop into cancer. When abnormal cells are found, your clinician may want to examine you more frequently.

Recently, a test has been developed that can look for the presence of HPV directly. This test can also determine what type of HPV is found, and whether it is likely to result in the development of cancer. Women who have both a pap smear and an HPV test on a regular basis are almost guaranteed to find developing cancer early, while it is still very treatable.

## Risk Factors for HPV Infection and Cervical Cancer

- Having sex at an early age
- Having many sexual partners
- Having a partner who has had many sexual partners

(Note: Infection with HPV is very common. At any given time, it is estimated that almost half of all sexually active men have HPV – and they can expose their partners to it. Over their lifetime, at least 80% of women will have some type of HPV infection.)

## How Is Cervical Cancer Treated?

Treatment for cervical cancer depends on how advanced the cancer is when it is diagnosed. As with most cancers, surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy are all sometimes used. The success rate for the treatment of early cervical cancer is very high.

## **Can Cervical Cancer Be Prevented?**

**Yes!** Cervical cancer is caused by specific strains of HPV. Scientists have developed a vaccine against two strains of HPV that cause 70 – 80% of all cervical cancers. The same vaccine protects against two other common HPV strains responsible for causing many cases of genital warts. This vaccine is recommended for all women between the ages of 11 and 26.

## **How Does the HPV Vaccine Work?**

The HPV vaccine prevents infection with four strains of HPV. Two strains are responsible for 70 – 80% of all cervical cancers; the other two are responsible for the majority of genital warts. However, the vaccine does not treat an HPV infection that you already have. The best time for a girl to be vaccinated is before she is exposed to any strains of HPV – before she is sexually active.

## **What About Boys? Should They be Vaccinated?**

The early research studies on the safety and efficacy of the HPV were done on girls and women because the goal of this vaccine was to prevent cervical cancer. These studies found that the HPV vaccine was safe and effective for them.

Scientists are doing studies on boys now. This vaccine may prevent some (much less common) cancers in men. It will also reduce the number of boys and men infected with HPV who go on to expose their sexual partners. A decision on whether to vaccinate boys and men will be made based on the findings of these studies.

## **Do Women Who Have Been Vaccinated Still Need a Pap Smear?**

Absolutely! No vaccine is 100% effective. Also, this vaccine protects women against infection by the two most common cancer-causing HPV infections, but not all of them.

## **Where Can I Get the HPV Vaccine?**

Contact your primary care doctor or your local health department. In Ontario County call 585-396-4559 for more information.

**Remember, Always... Prevention is Power!**