

## Are You at Risk for Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers in women throughout the world, but has become less common in countries where women routinely get pap tests. Today, one in 145 women in the US will develop cervical cancer in her lifetime according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

### What is Cervical Cancer?

Almost all cervical cancers are linked to a common infection in the cervix called human papillomavirus (HPV). Of the more than 100 types of HPV, many are benign, but some are linked to cancer of the cervix.

### Who is Most at Risk?

Your risk for cervical cancer depends on your sexual history, your immune system, your health and your lifestyle. Those at highest risk of developing cancer of the cervix include:

- Women with certain strains of HPV
- Women over age 30. While it can occur in younger women, cervical cancer rarely occurs in women younger than age 21
- Women who smoke are about twice as likely as nonsmokers to develop cervical cancer
- Women who have problems with their immune system
- Women with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection
- Women who were exposed to diethylstilbestrol (DES) before birth
- Women with a previous precancer of the cervix

### How Can I Prevent Cervical Cancer?

- Get regular Pap tests—they can detect cervical changes before they become cancerous
- Girls and women ages 9 – 26 should get the HPV vaccine. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology recommends the HPV vaccine be routinely given

to all girls ages 11 – 12; however, it can be given to girls as young as 9

- Be monogamous and practice safe sex
- Don't smoke

### What are the Warning Signs of Possible Cervical Cancer?

- Precancer and cancer of the cervix often have no symptoms; however, some of the warning signs include:
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- Spotting or discharge
- Bleeding after sex
- Signs of advanced cancer include pain, problems urinating, and swollen legs

## What Should I Know about Screening for Cervical Cancer?

- The Pap test is the best way to detect abnormal cells on the cervix. The American College of Ob-Gyns recommends that all women should have their first Pap test beginning at age 21.
- Women between the ages of 21 – 29 need a Pap test every two years, using either the standard method or liquid-based cytology.
- Low-risk women ages 30 – 64 who have had three consecutive normal Pap tests can be screened every three years. Another option includes combining a Pap test with an HPV DNA test (every three years if normal) to see if you have a high risk type of the virus.
- Low-risk women ages 65 and older, who have had three or more normal Pap tests within the last 10 years, can discontinue Pap testing unless they have risk factors for sexually transmitted diseases.
- Slightly abnormal Pap results may be followed up by an HPV test, a repeat Pap test, or colposcopy, which uses a magnifying instrument to view and biopsy abnormal cells.
- Pap tests that are more abnormal require colposcopy
- Many women who have had a hysterectomy may be able to discontinue routine Pap testing. Pap testing can be discontinued if the surgery removed the cervix and was done for reasons other than cancer or precancerous changes.
- Women who had precancerous changes before their hysterectomy should continue with routine screening.

Thank you to the **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists** for this information.