



Take charge to prevent cervical cancer

For many women, cervical cancer is preventable. It is usually caused by infection with certain types of human papillomavirus (HPV). About 80 percent of women will be infected during their lifetimes with a genital form of this virus through sex.

Most HPV infections do not cause symptoms and usually clear up within two years. When infection stays, cells on the cervix can become cancerous. This takes place over about 12 to 15 years.

Major risk factors include:

- The virus type
- Smoking
- History of adolescent intercourse, sexually transmitted diseases or many sexual partners

Regular exams and Pap tests can check for cervical changes and HPV infection. Women should go for

exams when they reach age 21 or are sexually active for three years. Most women should have a Pap test at least once every two to three years. Women younger than age 30 or who have abnormal test results may need yearly screenings.

These are general recommended guidelines that change over time. Always check with your health care provider about a screening schedule that is appropriate for you.

Females between ages 11 and 26 should get immunized before they are exposed to the virus. Lifestyle strategies can help reduce the risk, including:

- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Not smoking
- Eating green vegetables like broccoli

Quiz: Cervical cancer — What causes it, how to prevent it

Cervical cancer and the deaths it causes are preventable. To learn more, answer these true-false questions:

1. A group of viruses, called human papillomaviruses (HPVs), causes most cases of cervical cancer. ____
2. An HPV vaccine may prevent infection from high-risk HPVs. ____
3. An HPV vaccine may prevent all cases of cervical cancer. ____
4. Cervical cancer grows quickly. ____
5. A woman should have her first Pap test no later than the age of 21. ____

Answers

1. True. Most forms of HPV cause no symptoms, while others cause harmless warts on hands and feet. But high-risk HPVs, passed during sex, may cause genital warts or unusual cell growth in the cervix. This unusual cell growth can later become cervical cancer.
2. True. An HPV vaccine may prevent infection from sexually transmitted HPV. Talk to your health care provider if you have questions or concerns about HPV vaccines.
3. False. HPV vaccines may offer protection from types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer. Early vaccination must be backed up by regular Pap tests. This screening test helps health care providers find and treat early cervical changes that might otherwise turn into cancer.
4. False. It is a slow-growing cancer.
5. True. Women should have their first Pap test about three years after they become sexually active, but no later than age 21. The Pap test should be repeated at least once every three years.