

CERVICAL CANCER

What is cervical cancer?

Cancer of the cervix, also called cervical cancer, occurs when abnormal cells divide without order or control and destroy tissues around them. Most cervical cancers begin as abnormal changes in cells on the surface of the cervix. Cancer of the cervix can occur when abnormal cell changes of the cervix are not monitored or treated over time. It can take from 10 to 15 years for cell changes to develop into cancer.

How do we detect it?

A woman can find out if she has abnormal cell changes by having a Pap test done. The Pap test is a screening tool meaning that it tests women who are healthy, before they develop any symptoms. The Pap test, like other medical tests are not perfect, so it is important to have one on a regular basis so abnormal cells are not missed. This simple test can be done at your doctor's office.

What is a Pap test?

To see your cervix, the doctor or nurse will gently put an instrument called a speculum in your vagina. A small number of cells are gently taken from the cervix and sent to the laboratory to be looked at. Do not have your Pap test when you are having your period. Avoid having sex for 24 hours before the test. The results will be sent to you.

Who is at risk?

Every woman is potentially at risk. Cervical cancer is most common in women between the ages of 40 to 49; however, many women in between 20 and 39 are now being diagnosed and treated. Other risks for developing cervical cancer are in women who:

- smoke
- have had genital warts
- become sexually active at young age
- have many sex partners
- have been exposed to human papillomavirus (HPV) and the viruses responsible for genital herpes
- are immigrants, aboriginal, or have a low socio-economic status, often because they **have not been screened at all** or have not been screened regularly

Other facts about the cervical cancer and the Pap test

Since the introduction of the Pap test more than 25 years ago, there has been a large drop in the death rate from cervical cancer. Although cervical cancer is felt to be mostly preventable, women still develop the disease every year. Research shows that many women in Alberta who develop cervical cancer **have never had a Pap test**, or have not had one as often as recommended. All women over 18 years of age who have not had their cervix removed, should have a Pap test once a year.

Over 90% of cervical cancers can be cured when detected early and treated.

In Alberta there are,

- about 120-150 cases of cervical cancer every year
- about 40 deaths from cervical cancer every year

In Canada, in 2002, about 1,400 women were diagnosed with cervical cancer. Of those, 410 of them died from the disease.

**Remember the greatest risk factor for cervical cancer is not having a Pap test!
Take control of your health by having a regular Pap test.**