

IT'S TIME TO END CERVICAL CANCER



WHAT WOMEN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS AND CERVICAL CANCER:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides information on how to prevent cervical cancer, which is caused by persistent infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV). The information is geared toward women interested in screening methods, detection of precancerous cervical lesions and treatment methods. Further information on HPV vaccines is available on the PAHO website.

In the Americas, cervical cancer causes more than 34,000 deaths per year.

Informed women taking control of their health can help ensure that they are screened for cervical cancer, and receive the appropriate treatment, which is critical to end cervical cancer.

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cancer is a disease in which cells multiply uncontrollably. When cancer develops in the cervix, or neck of the uterus, it is called cervical cancer. If the cancer continues to grow, it can spread to other parts of the body, beyond the cervix.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF CERVICAL CANCER?

Persistent infection with high-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer.

WHAT IS THE HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus, transmitted through skin-to-skin sexual contact. Most people will have an HPV infection during their lifetime, even though they do not know they have it and many may not have any signs or symptoms of infection. Most HPV infections clear on their own.

CAN ALL HPV TYPES CAUSE CERVICAL CANCER?

There are over 100 types of HPV. There are low-risk HPV types, many of which cause genital warts. **These are not related to cancer.** There are high-risk HPV types that cause cervical cancer and other HPV-related cancers. Persistent infection with high-risk HPV can cause precancerous cervical lesions. **If the lesions are not detected and not treated, they can slowly develop into cervical cancer.**

DOES HPV CAUSE ANY OTHER DISEASES?

In rare cases, HPV can cause other types of cancers, including vaginal, vulvar, penile, anal or oral cancer. HPV can also cause genital warts in both men and women.

WHAT ARE GENITAL WARTS?

Genital warts are infections of the skin caused by low-risk types of HPV. Genital warts will not develop into cervical cancer, but they may require treatment if they do not go away on their own.

AM I AT RISK OF DEVELOPING CERVICAL CANCER?

All sexually active people are at risk of developing an HPV infection at some point in their lives. Most HPV infections disappear on their own. Generally, women who are over 30 years of age



and have a persistent infection with high-risk types of HPV are at risk of developing cervical cancer. Other risk factors for cervical cancer are: multiple sexual partners; early age at first birth; giving birth to three or more children; HIV-positive status; tobacco smoking.

DO INTRAUTERINE CONTRACEPTIVE DEVICES (IUDs) OR BIRTH CONTROL PILLS CAUSE CERVICAL CANCER?

No. IUDs and birth control pills do not cause cervical cancer. They protect against unplanned pregnancies.

HOW CAN CERVICAL CANCER BE PREVENTED?

The most effective ways to prevent cervical cancer are to vaccinate girls against HPV, before their first sexual contact and to screen women aged 30-49 years. If a woman's screening test is abnormal, she needs to be promptly treated. If the test is normal, it's a good idea to have repeat screening, according to national guidelines. Sexually active people should practice behaviors that prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (e.g. using condoms, having as few sexual partners as possible).



WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER? ANTICONCEPTIVAS?

Cervical cancer is caused by persistent infection with high-risk HPV types. The infection can cause lesions on the cervix, which, over time, if they are not detected and treated, will lead to cancer. Lesions refers to changes in the cells of the cervix, caused by the HPV infection. They are painless, invisible, and cannot be felt.

CAN MEN ALSO BE INFECTED BY HPV?

Yes, men can have an HPV infection, just like women. HPV-related cancer in men, include anal, penile and oral cancer, but these are less common than cervical cancer in women.

DOES HPV PRODUCE SYMPTOMS?

An HPV infection does not produce symptoms, which is why it is important for you to be screened for cervical cancer and be tested for HPV infection. HPV infection will most often disappear on its own, as a result of the body's natural immune response, particularly in younger women.

CAN HPV BE TREATED?

There is no treatment for HPV infection, but there is treatment for the health effects of HPV infection. Warts can be removed. Cervical precancerous lesions can be treated, by freezing or removing the HPV-infected cervical cells.

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING?

Cervical cancer screening is the testing of all women at risk for cervical cancer, to check for any early changes in the cervix. If precancerous lesions are detected, but not treated, they will evolve to cancer over time. Women aged 30-49 years of age should be screened for cervical cancer.

DO I NEED SCREENING IF I HAVE NO SYMPTOMS?

Persistent infection with high-risk HPV can cause changes in the cells of the cervix, called pre-cancer, which does not have symptoms. Women must be screened at least once between the

ages of 30 and 49 years and must be treated if there are precancerous lesions or cancer.

I RECEIVED THE HPV VACCINE. DO I STILL NEED TO BE SCREENED FOR CERVICAL CANCER?

It is very important to be screened for cervical cancer, if you are between 30-49 years of age, even if you already received the HPV vaccine.

WHAT IS DONE DURING SCREENING?

There are different tests that can be used to screen women for cervical cancer. For most tests, the healthcare provider will do a pelvic examination to gently swab the cervix. While the test is not painful, it can be a little uncomfortable to have a pelvic examination. Some tests give the results right away and others require sending the sample to a laboratory and waiting for results.



WHAT IF MY SCREENING RESULT IS NORMAL?

If the screening test is normal, it means that there is no sign of changes in the cervix that could develop into cervical cancer. It is important for women to be screened regularly, as indicated by national guidelines.

WHAT IF MY SCREENING RESULT IS ABNORMAL?

In most cases, an abnormal screening test means the woman has pre-cancer, a condition that needs to be treated.

DOES AN ABNORMAL SCREENING RESULT MEAN THAT I HAVE CANCER?

An abnormal screening test result does not necessarily mean that a woman has cancer. Most often it means that she has pre-cancer, or early changes



that could become cancer in many years if not treated. Pre-cancer is easy to treat. Very rarely a woman is found to have signs of cervical cancer at the time of screening. If signs of possible cancer are found, the woman will need to be referred to a hospital for further testing and/or treatment.

HOW IS PRE-CANCER TREATED?

The treatment for pre-cancer is to remove the lesions, either by freezing (cryotherapy) or ablation. Cryotherapy involves freezing the lesions. It is not painful, although it involves a pelvic examination, which can be uncomfortable. It is effective and safe. Another treatment method is loop electrosurgical excision procedure (LEEP).

ARE SCREENING TESTS PAINFUL?

Screening tests are painless, though women may feel a little uncomfortable during a pelvic examination. No part of the cervix or womb is removed during a screening test.



IS ONLY ONE SCREENING ENOUGH?

If a woman is screened at least once in her lifetime, between the ages of 30 and 49 years, it may offer some protection. However, if it is possible to be screened more than once, this should be done according to the frequency defined by the country's screening guideline.





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www.paho.org/end-cervical-cancer