



# Women's Health: Cervical Cancer

## *What every woman needs to know*

Cervical cancer used to be one of the leading causes of death for women in the United States. However, over the past four decades, these rates have declined significantly due to widespread awareness and use of screenings.

### **Causes**

The most common form of cervical cancer starts with precancerous changes within the cervix. These changes can lead to cervical cancer if left untreated. Most precancers of the cervix can be avoided by reducing exposure to HPV, a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the human papillomavirus.

Human papillomavirus is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 100 different strains or types. More than 30 of these viruses are sexually transmitted. Most people who become infected with HPV will not have any symptoms and will clear the infection on their own. However, left untreated in

women, HPV can lead to cervical cancer.

Other factors that may contribute to the risk of developing cervical cancer include:

- Giving birth to many children
- Having many sexual partners
- Experiencing first sexual intercourse at a young age
- Smoking
- Using oral contraceptives
- A weakened immune system

### **Symptoms**

Early symptoms of cervical cancer may not be noticeable. However, some symptoms include vaginal bleeding, unusual vaginal discharge, pelvic pain or pain during sexual intercourse. It is important to remember that these symptoms can also be a sign of other problems as well, but you should still see your

doctor and have regular Pap tests to eliminate cervical cancer as their cause.

### **Prevention**

Getting regular Pap tests can save your life. If a Pap test finds precancerous cervical lesions and they are treated early, invasive cervical cancer can usually be prevented and early-stage cancer cured. Regular Pap tests decrease your risk for developing cervical cancer because they can detect precancerous cervical lesions at early, treatable stages.



## **Did you know...?**

Currently there are two vaccines available to help prevent certain types of HPV and some of the cancers linked to those types. Both vaccines prevent against the two types of HPV (HPV 16 and 18) that cause 70 percent of all cervical cancers.