CERVICAL CANCER

The cervix is the lower, narrow end of the uterus that protrudes into the vagina. It is a canal that connects the uterus with the vagina. Cervical cancer, like other cancers, is a disease where the growth of abnormal cells is uncontrollable and cannot be stopped. Cervical cancer can spread to the vagina, uterus, and other parts of the body if it is left untreated.

RISK FACTORS

All women are at risk for cervical cancer because most cases of cervical cancer are caused by a virus called HPV. Most sexually active women have been exposed to HPV at some point in their lifetime. There are many types of HPV. Usually HPV will go away on its own, but if it does not, it may cause cervical cancer over time.

Other risk factors include smoking and having HIV (the virus that causes AIDS). Women who smoke are at least four times more likely to have complications from HPV infection than women who do not smoke.

SYMPTOMS

Early on, cervical cancer is often asymptomatic, making it crucial to see a physician regularly and have routine testing for cervical cancer. As it progresses, cervical cancer may be associated with abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge, such as bleeding after intercourse. Be sure to see a physician regularly and if you have these symptoms.

HOW CAN CERVICAL CANCER BE PREVENTED?

The HPV vaccine protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical cancer. The vaccine is given in a series of three shots and is recommended for girls beginning ages 11 or 12. It is also recommended for girls and women aged 13 through 26 who did not get any or all of the shots when they were younger.

- See your doctor regularly for a Pap test.
- Follow up with your doctor if your Pap test results are not normal.
- Don’t smoke.
- Use condoms during sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.

RECOMMENDED SCREENING METHODS & GUIDELINES

The Pap test is the most reliable and effective screening test for cervical cancer. Women should start getting regular Pap tests at age 21 and if results are normal, the test can be repeated every 3 years. Current guidelines urge women ages 30-65 years to get both a Pap test and an HPV test.

Abnormal results for either the Pap test or the HPV test warrant either closer follow-up or further testing, depending on the patient’s age, history, and Pap test result details.

In the following situations, doctors may decide to discontinue cervical cancer screening:

- You are older than 65 and have had normal Pap test results for several years.
- You have had your cervix removed as part of a total hysterectomy for non-cancerous conditions, like fibroids.

*Recommendations may vary based on a patient’s history and risk factors and should be discussed with your physician.