

# About Cervical Cancer

## A Quick Guide

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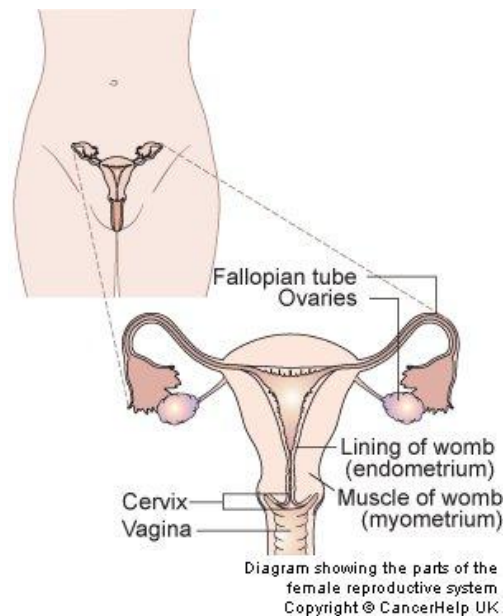
This is a brief summary of 'About cervical cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

- The cervix
- Cervical cancer risks and causes
- Cervical cancer screening
- Cervical cancer symptoms
- Types of cervical cancer
- Should I see a cervical cancer specialist?
- Questions for your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

### The cervix

The cervix is another name for the neck of the womb. It is the opening to the womb from the vagina. It is really a strong muscle. Normally it is quite tightly shut, but during labour it opens up to let the baby out.



### The cells of the cervix

The cervix has a layer of skin like cells on its outer surface. Cancer of these cells is called squamous cell cervical cancer. There are glandular cells lining the inside of the cervix. The glandular cells produce mucus. Cancer of these cells is called adenocarcinoma of the cervix.

The area where cervical cells are most likely to become cancerous is called the transformation zone. It is the area around the opening of the cervix that leads on to the narrow passageway running up into the womb.

## Lymph nodes

There are lymph nodes around the womb and cervix. The nearest large groups of lymph nodes are in the groin (at the top of each of your thighs). The lymph nodes are part of the lymphatic system (this filters body fluid and fights infection). Tissue fluid that bathes the area containing the cancer will drain to the nearest lymph nodes. When you have surgery for cancer, your surgeon will usually take out some lymph nodes and send them to the lab to be checked for any cancer cells that have broken away from the tumour.

## Cervical cancer risks and causes

### HPV infection

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the major cause of cervical cancer. There are many different types of HPV. Some types of HPV cause genital warts and are sometimes called the genital wart virus. The types of HPV that cause warts are not the types that cause cervical cancer. Some other types of HPV are considered high risk for cancer of the cervix. HPV is passed on from person to another through sexual contact.

Women who get cervical cancer have had past infections with HPV. High risk types of HPV can cause changes in the cells covering the cervix that make them more likely to become cancerous in time. But most women infected with these viruses do NOT develop cervical cancer. So other factors must also be needed.

### Other risks

Women who smoke are more likely to get cervical cancer than those who don't. Taking the pill could increase a woman's risk of cervical cancer. It is not clear why this is. Women with a weakened immune system are also more likely to get cervical cancer and so are those who have had a large number of children.

## Cervical cancer screening

Cervical screening is a way of preventing cancer by finding and treating early changes in the neck of the womb (cervix). These changes could lead to cervical cancer if left untreated.

The screening test is called cytology. Many people call this a smear test. A nurse or doctor takes a sample of cells from the cervix with a small brush. They send the cells to be checked for abnormalities.

### Who has screening?

In England, Northern Ireland and Wales, the NHS cervical screening programme invites women from ages 25 to 64 for cervical screening. Women aged 25 to 49 are invited every 3 years. After that, women are invited every 5 years until the age of 64.

In Scotland, women aged 20 to 60 are invited for screening every 3 years. But in 2016, this will change to follow the same screening schedule as England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

### Screening test results

The screening test can pick up abnormal cell changes. If you have these changes it does NOT mean that you have cervical cancer. But if these abnormal cells were left untreated, they may develop into cervical cancer in the future.

### **Cervical cancer symptoms**

The most common symptom of cervical cancer is bleeding from the vagina at other times than when you are having a period. You may have bleeding:

- Between periods
- After or during sex
- At any time if you are past your menopause

Some women also have:

- A vaginal discharge that smells unpleasant
- Discomfort or pain during sex

Doctors call pain related to sex dyspareunia. There are many other conditions that cause these symptoms. Most of them are much more common than cervical cancer. But you should go to your doctor straight away if you have any of these symptoms. You probably don't have cancer. But if you do, the sooner you are treated, the more likely you are to be cured and usually the less treatment you will need to have.

Pre cancerous cell changes do not usually have any symptoms. Which is why it is so important to have a regular smear test.

### **Types of cervical cancer**

There are two main types of cervical cancer:

- Squamous cell cancer
- Adenocarcinoma

They are named after the type of cell that becomes cancerous.

### **Squamous cell cancer**

Squamous cells are the flat skin like cells that cover the outer surface of the cervix (the ectocervix). Squamous cell cancer is the most common type of cervical cancer.

### **Adenocarcinoma**

Adenomatous cells are gland cells that produce mucus. The cervix has these gland cells scattered along the inside of the passageway that runs from the cervix to the womb (the endocervical canal).

Adenocarcinoma is a cancer of these gland cells. It is less common than squamous cell cancer, but has become more common in recent years. Between 1 in 10 and 1 in 20 cases of cervical cancer are adenocarcinoma. It is treated in the same way as squamous cell cancer of the cervix.

### **Other rarer types of cancer**

Very rarely, other types of cancer can occur in the cervix. For example, lymphoma which is a cancer of the lymphatic system. If you have this rare cancer, then this information is not the right one. We have separate information on lymphoma and its treatment.

### **Should I see a cervical cancer specialist?**

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who may have something much less serious. There are guidelines for GPs to help them decide which patients need to see a specialist urgently.

### **What your GP should do first**

Your GP should examine you internally if you have a change in your menstrual cycle, bleeding after sex, bleeding if you are past your menopause, or an abnormal discharge from your vagina. The GP should do a full internal examination of your vagina, using a speculum so that they can see the cervix properly.

### Guidelines for urgent referral

You should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral. The symptoms that need urgent referral for possible cancer of the cervix are:

- Any sign of cancer of the cervix your GP can see from an internal examination
- Heavy bleeding after the menopause in women not on hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- Bleeding that is persistent or unexplained after stopping HRT for 6 weeks
- Repeated bleeding after sex or between periods for no apparent reason

If you are concerned that your GP is not taking your symptoms as seriously as you think they should, you take this information along with you.

### What to ask your doctor about cervical cancer

- How will I know if I have cervical cancer?
- Am I more likely to get cervical cancer than anyone else?
- Will smoking affect my risk of cervical cancer?
- My mother had cervical cancer. Does this mean I am more likely to get it?
- Is there anything I can do to lower my risk of cervical cancer?
- How often should I have a smear test?
- Who will give me the results of my smear test?
- Will the results be explained to me?
- I have had a hysterectomy. Do I still need smear tests?
- How are smears checked in this health authority?
- Is there an alternative to smear tests?
- I have had an abnormal smear. How long will I have to wait for treatment?

**For more information**, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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