Article Series Cervical

Understanding Cervical Cancer

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Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women worldwide. The good news is, it can be prevented and treated if found early. Learn more about cervical cancer and how you can reduce your risk.

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer occurs when cells in the cervix grow out of control. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. It has two sections: the inner endocervix and the outer ectocervix.

How Do Normal Cells Turn into Cancer Cells?

When healthy cells in the cervix experience changes in their DNA, they can become cancerous. These changes cause cells to multiply too quickly, forming a tumor.

Types of Cervical Cancer

The two main types of cervical cancer are:

- **Squamous cell carcinoma:** the most common, starting in the ectocervix
- **Adenocarcinoma:** develops in the endocervix

Cervical cancer that has features of both is called mixed carcinoma or adenosquamous carcinoma.

Symptoms of Cervical Cancer

In early stages, there may be no symptoms. As cancer grows, symptoms may include:

- Vaginal bleeding (after sex, after menopause, or between periods)
- Vaginal discharge that is watery, bloody, or has a strong odor
- Pain during sex

If the cancer has spread beyond the cervix, you may also experience:

- Difficult/painful urination or bowel movements
- Blood in urine or stool
- Back or abdominal pain
- Swollen legs

These symptoms may be caused by other conditions, so it’s important to consult your doctor.

Causes of Cervical Cancer

The main cause of cervical cancer is human papillomavirus (HPV), a virus spread through sexual contact. Nearly everyone who is sexually active will get HPV. Most HPV infections clear on their own, but chronic high-risk infections can lead to cancer.

Risk Factors for Cervical Cancer

HPV is the most important risk factor, but other factors may include:

- Being sexually active at a young age (before age 18)
- Multiple sexual partners
- Weakened immune system (from an HIV infection or certain medications, for example)
- Smoking

How Can You Prevent Cervical Cancer?

The best ways to prevent cervical cancer are getting the HPV vaccine and regular screenings.

HPV vaccination

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends routine vaccination at 11-12 years, but vaccination can begin at age 9 and continue up to age 26.

Cervical Cancer Screening

Doctors can use the following tests:

- **HPV test:** looks for cells infected with HPV that can cause cancer
- **Pap test:** checks for precancerous cells and cervical cancer cells; named after its inventor, Dr. George Papanicolaou
- **HPV/Pap cotest:** combines both tests

The HPV and Pap tests are performed during a speculum exam, where a doctor inserts an instrument to open the vagina for a clearer view of the cervix. Then, a small brush is used to collect cervical cells for testing.

When Should You Get Screened?

- **Starting age 21 to 29 years:** Pap test every 3 years
- **Then, from ages 30 to 65 years:** HPV test or HPV/Pap cotest every 5 years, or Pap test every 3 years

How is Cervical Cancer Diagnosed?

If cervical cancer is suspected, a doctor may perform:

- **Colposcopy:** uses a magnifying instrument called a colposcope to look for abnormalities in the cervix
- **Biopsy:** removes a tissue sample from the cervix to check for cancer

For more on HPV and cervical cancer treatment, check out our articles on Understanding Human Papillomavirus and Cervical Cancer Treatment & Clinical Trials.