

Lifelines™



from the National Cancer Institute

The Cervical Cancer Story Could Have a Happy Ending

By the National Cancer Institute

[Cervical cancer](#) was once the leading cause of death from cancer in American women. But over the last 50 years, the number of new cervical cancer cases diagnosed each year has decreased by nearly three-quarters, thanks to the widespread adoption of cervical screening, which can detect changes in the cervix before they become cancer.

Although cervical cancer rates have fallen in African Americans, your chances of developing the disease are about 39 percent higher than those of white women, and you are twice as likely to die from the disease. These disparities are seen even though screening rates are similar in African American and white women. The poorer outcomes in African American women could result from poorer quality screening or inadequate follow up tests when abnormal results come from screening. So in addition to making sure to get screened, it is very important to find out your test results and to make sure to get any needed follow up tests or procedures.

Screening for Cervical Cancer

The reason that cases of cervical cancer and deaths from this disease have gone down is that more and more women are getting the Pap test, a simple procedure that lets your doctor find cells in your cervix that have changed in ways that could eventually develop into cancer.

Many experts recommend that women have a Pap test every 3 years beginning at age 21. In women over age 30, screening with both a Pap test and a test to detect cancer-causing types of human papillomavirus (HPV) is recommended. Infections with certain types of HPV cause essentially all cervical cancer. HPV can be transmitted during many kinds of sexual contact, even when a condom is used, and HPV infections are very common. However, most infections go away on their own. Infections that do not go away on their own can cause cells to become abnormal and, eventually, cancer. But if abnormal or precancerous cells are found early, they can be treated before they become cancer.

Preventing HPV Infections

[Because nearly all cervical cancer is caused by infection with certain types of HPV](#), researchers have developed vaccines to prevent infection in the first place. The vaccines work by training

the immune system to fight off the HPV types that cause most cervical and other HPV-related cancers. The vaccines are proven to be effective only if they are given before a person is infected with HPV, so routine vaccination is recommended at ages 11 or 12, before sexual activity. The vaccines can be given to girls as young as 9 or as old as 25 or 26 (depending on the vaccine).

Because the vaccines do not prevent infection with all HPV types that cause cancer, it is very important that women who have been vaccinated have regular cervical screening

Cervical cancer is clearly a success story for medical research, but only you can prevent cervical cancer with cervical screening and the HPV vaccine.

You can learn more from NCI about cervical cancer at

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/detection/Pap-HPV-testing> and
<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/prevention/HPV-vaccine>.

NCI leads the National Cancer Program and the NIH effort to dramatically reduce the burden of cancer and improve the lives of cancer patients and their families, through research into prevention and cancer biology, the development of new interventions, and the training and mentoring of new researchers. For more information about cancer, please visit the NCI web site at www.cancer.gov or call NCI's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237). More articles and videos in the culturally relevant Lifelines series are available at www.cancer.gov/lifelines.