



## SCREENING FOR CERVICAL CANCER

### The Issue

Cervical cancer can for the most part be avoided or easily treated by regular screening. However, most women who develop it have not been screened in the three years prior to their diagnosis.

### Background

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus leading into the vagina.

This is an area where cells change rapidly, and where malignant cell changes are most likely to occur. While cervical cancer is the tenth most common cancer among Canadian women of all ages, it is the third most common among women aged 20 to 49.

The Papanicolaou (Pap) smear test is used to detect changes in the cervix before they become cancerous or when they are at a stage when treatment can be effective. Since the introduction of the Pap test more than 25 years ago, the death rate from cervical cancer has declined dramatically, dropping almost 50 percent. The survival rate is 74 percent over five years.

However, approximately 1,450 Canadian women will receive a diagnosis this year of invasive cervical cancer, and approximately 420 women will die from this disease. Aboriginal or immigrant women and women who are older (aged 40-59) or have a lower socio-economic status are at higher risk of developing cervical cancer, primarily because they have not been screened at all or have been screened irregularly.

### Risk Factors For Cervical Cancer

The risk factors for cervical cancer are similar to those for sexually transmitted diseases.

- You are more likely to develop cervical cancer if you have multiple sexual partners or if you become sexually active at an early age. Early sexual activity is believed to increase the risk because during puberty, cervical tissue undergoes many changes that might make the area more vulnerable to damage.
- Males who have had multiple sexual partners are also a factor. Male partners of cervical cancer patients report many more sexual partners than those of women without the disease.

- Infection with human papillomavirus (HPV) increases your risk 20 to 100 times. HPV is a sexually transmitted virus that is quite common, especially among younger women. However, there are over 100 types of HPV and only a few are high risk types. Only a fraction of women infected with high risk types will develop cervical cancer.
- In some studies, cigarette smoking has been found to increase the risk.
- Using barrier-type contraceptive methods, such as condoms or a diaphragm, instead of oral contraceptives lowers your risk.

## Minimizing Your Risk

- Have a Pap test at age 18 as part of your routine health examination, or as soon as you become sexually active. A second test should be taken after one year, especially if you begin screening after age 20.
- If your first two tests show no abnormality, you should be re-screened every three years to age 69. However, you do not need to be re-screened if you have never had sexual intercourse or if you have had a non-cancerous hysterectomy and your previous tests were normal.
- If you are over the age of 69, and have had at least two clear Pap tests, no cervical abnormalities for nine years and no history of cancer, you do not need regular screening.

- If an abnormality is detected during a Pap test, you should be re-tested every six months for two years.
- Limit your number of sexual partners and be aware of your partners' sexual history.

## Health Canada's Role

Health Canada is working with the provincial and territorial health ministries to coordinate cervical cancer screening activities and screening programs across the country. The aim is to reach high-risk women, standardize screening practices, assess new technologies, monitor results and provide better follow-up procedures.

## Need More Info?

For more information, contact:

Health Canada  
(<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/ahi/cervicalcancer/index.html>)

Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care  
(<http://www.ctfphc.org/>)

Canadian Cancer Society  
([http://www.cancer.ca/english/CI\\_cervicalcancer.asp](http://www.cancer.ca/english/CI_cervicalcancer.asp))

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada  
(<http://www.sogc.medical.org/SOGCnet/index.html>)

The Gynecologic Oncologists of Canada  
(<http://www.g-oc.org/>)

The Society of Canadian Colposcopists  
main tel: (416) 586-8279

Breast Cancer  
([http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/diseases/breast\\_cancer.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/diseases/breast_cancer.html))

Skin Cancer  
(<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/iyh/diseases/cancer.html>)