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Heading off cervical cancer

What causes cervical cancer?

Most often, infection with a virus known as human papillomavirus (HPV). You can get HPV by having sexual contact with someone who has the virus.

Prevention tip #1: Protect yourself against HPV infection. Talk to your doctor, especially about the HPV vaccine.

How does it grow?

Slowly. It begins with small changes in the cells that line the cervix. It can stay in this early stage for 2 to 10 years before invading nearby tissue.

Prevention tip #2: Find and treat these small changes early. Talk to your doctor about pelvic exams and Pap tests.

HPV vaccine

Ask your doctor if it is right for you. He or she will give you the shot based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations.

For: Girls and women under the age of 26, starting at age 11 or 12

What's recommended: A series of 3 shots over 6 months

Note: The vaccine is most effective if you get it before exposure to HPV (before you are sexually active). This is why the CDC recommends it for girls as young as 11.

Pelvic exam and Pap test

If you get the vaccine, it is still important to get regular pelvic exams and Pap tests. The exams and screenings are your second line of defense.

During a pelvic exam, a doctor checks your reproductive organs to make sure they are healthy. A Pap test is part of a pelvic exam. This simple test looks for changes in the cervix that may lead to cancer.

For: Women 21 years of age and older. Ask your doctor what's right for you.

What's recommended:

Pelvic exam — usually once a year

Pap test — every 1 – 3 years based on age, risk factors and earlier Pap results

Good news: Pap tests can help spot cervical changes early. And abnormal tests do not automatically mean cancer. In fact, removing abnormal cells early can help prevent cancer from developing and spreading.

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