



Cervical Cancer and Screening

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cancer is a disease where abnormal cells grow without control and can invade other tissues. There are many different types of cancer, which are named after the part of the body where the cancer starts in. Cervical cancer refers to cancer of the cervix.

The cervix is located at the top of the vagina and is the opening to the uterus. The cervix is made up of cells. In many women, cells of the cervix can change from healthy to unhealthy. Typically, the unhealthy cells change back to healthy cells on their own. However, in some cases the cells of the cervix remain unhealthy, which can increase a woman's risk of cervical cancer.

Before cervical cancer develops, the cells of the cervix start to change and become abnormal. These abnormal changes are precancerous, which means they are not cancer, but could become cancerous.

How Do You Get It?

There is no single cause of cervical cancer, but certain factors appear to increase the risk of developing it. The main risk factor for developing cervical

cancer is infection of the cervix with Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)¹. (For more information on HPV infection see NAHO's fact sheet entitled What is HPV?)

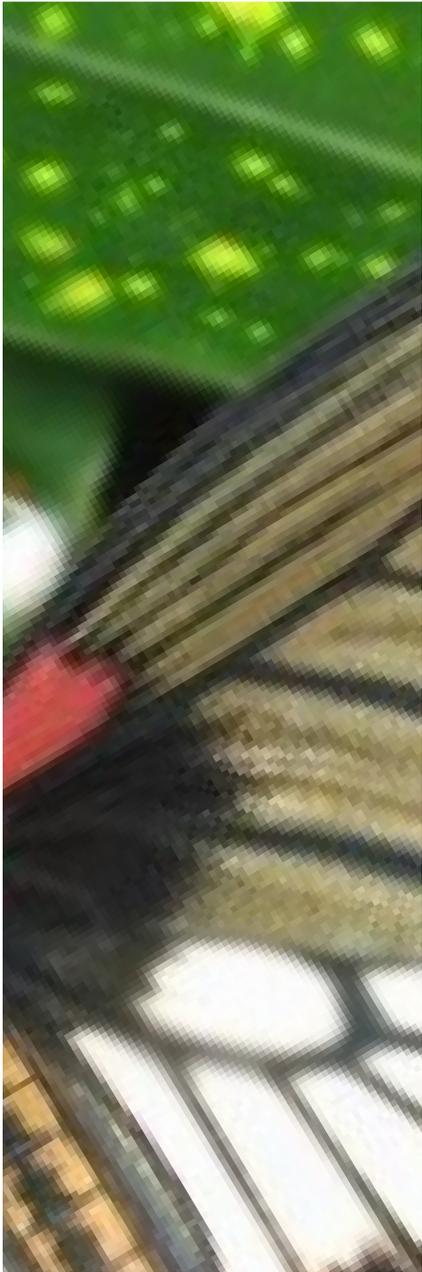
Other risk factors include:

- Not getting regular Pap tests.
- Multiple sexual partners.
- Young age at first intercourse.
- Tobacco use.
- Having many children.
- Human Immunodeficiency Virus infection (HIV).
- Increased age.²

Screening - What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is a normal and routine test done to check the health of a woman's cervix and the surrounding area. An HPV infection that is not diagnosed can become cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva or anus³. Regular Pap tests can detect early cell changes on the cervix caused by HPV.

During a Pap test, the doctor or nurse will use a plastic or metal instrument called a speculum to widen the opening of the vagina for a better view of the cervix. The doctor or nurse will collect a



few cells and mucus from the cervix and area around the cervix. These cells are placed on a slide and sent to a laboratory to be checked for abnormal cells.

Important facts about Pap tests:

- A “positive” Pap test means the results of the test weren’t normal.
- Abnormal Pap findings are always followed up with further tests based on your doctor’s or nurse’s recommendations.
- A Pap test cannot tell you whether you have an STI, HPV or cancer.
- Your health care provider can test for STIs as part of a regular pelvic exam or separately, but you need to ask for it.

Unfortunately, many women find the Pap test physically and emotionally uncomfortable. Studies have shown that First Nations women do not get tested as often or as regularly as non-Aboriginal women.⁴

Getting regular Pap tests is an important

step to take to prevent cervical cancer. If detected early, precancerous cells can be treated successfully.

Cervical Cancer and First Nations and Inuit Women

In 2008, an estimated 1,300 Canadian women were diagnosed with cervical cancer and 380 women will die from it⁵.

Cervical cancer disproportionately affects Aboriginal women in Canada. There is no national data on cervical cancer for First Nations women, however, regional studies for this population consistently show:

- Higher than average rates of cervical cancer.
- Higher than average rates of mortality due to cervical cancer.
- Heightened rates of cervical cancer are linked to lower screening rates.⁶

For Inuit women, cervical cancer rates are twice as high than in non-Inuit women in Canada.⁷ Cervical Cancer

accounts for approximately 15 per cent of all cancers in Inuit women. A report profiling cancer rates from 1992–2001 in Nunavut stated that the most common cancer among women was cancer of the cervix. Most cases in Inuit women were diagnosed in those between the ages of 20–39.⁸



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