



## **It Could Save Your Life: Quick Facts on Cervical Cancer and the Pap Test**

### **What is cancer?**

Our bodies are made up of millions of cells, grouped together to form tissues or organs such as muscles and bones, the lungs, or the liver. Normally, cells divide to produce more cells only when the body needs them. Sometimes cells behave abnormally, and keep dividing even when new cells are not needed. If this happens, lumps or tumours form and can spread to other parts of the body.

Tumours can be either benign (non-cancerous) or malignant (cancerous). Benign tumour cells do not spread to other parts of the body, and are not usually life-threatening. Malignant tumour cells are able to invade the tissues around them and spread to other parts of the body. It is important to find malignant tumours early and treat them.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is cervical cancer?**

Different types of cancers are named after the part of the body where they start. Cervical cancer starts in a woman's cervix, which is the tubular passage that connects the lower end of a woman's uterus (womb) and the upper end of the vagina (birth canal).

### **How common is cervical cancer?**

Cancer of the cervix is diagnosed annually in about one million women worldwide. About half of these women die from it. In Canada, cervical cancer is the 11<sup>th</sup> most common cancer in women.<sup>2</sup>

Although there is no national data on cervical cancer for First Nations women, regional studies consistently show that First Nations women have higher than average rates of cervical cancer, and higher than average mortality rates – that is, they are more likely to die – from the disease.<sup>3</sup>

### **What causes it?**

Doctors and scientists usually cannot say for certain what causes cancer. However, they can identify “risk factors”, meaning that these factors increase a person's chance of developing a disease.

The most important risk factor for developing cervical cancer is a viral infection of the cervix called human papillomavirus (HPV). It is estimated that 99% of cervical cancer cases are caused by HPV.<sup>4</sup> HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the world. It is estimated that at least half of sexually active men and women have, or have had HPV. The main symptoms of HPV are small growths or warts on the genital area. There is no cure for HPV.

There are 30 different types of the HPV virus and in most cases the virus will clear up by itself and does not increase the risk of cervical cancer. In rare cases, the virus is persistent (does not go away). These “high-risk” types of the virus are the main risk factor for cervical cancer.

Other factors that appear to increase the risk of cervical cancer are: becoming sexually active at a young age; multiple sexual partners; smoking; and suppression of the immune system by drugs after an organ transplant or a condition such as AIDS. However, some women develop cervical cancer without any of these risk factors.

### **What can be done to prevent or cure it?**

Cervical cancer can be cured or prevented if it is detected early. The **Pap test** can show the presence of cancerous or pre-cancerous cells in the cervix. Detecting cervical cancer in its early stages greatly improves a woman’s chance of survival, because the cancerous cells can be removed before they spread to other parts of the body.

Another way to prevent cervical cancer is to **prevent HPV**. HPV is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact. You can protect yourself against getting HPV by using condoms during sex.

Recently, scientists have developed a vaccine that will prevent women from getting HPV. However, this vaccine is not yet available in Canada unless you pay for it (it costs about \$400).

### **Tell me more about the Pap Test.**

The Pap test is named after George Papanicolaou, an American researcher who invented the test in the 1950s. During the test, the doctor or nurse uses a plastic or metal instrument, called a speculum, to widen the vagina. This helps the doctor or nurse examine the vagina and the cervix, and collect a few cells and mucus from the cervix and the area around it. These cells are placed on a slide and sent to a laboratory to be checked for abnormal cells.

A “positive” Pap test result means that your results aren't normal, but does not always mean you have cancer. It is very important that abnormal findings are followed up with further tests.

Health Canada recommends that women should have a Pap test once they are 18 years old, or once they become sexually active. A second test should be done after one year. If these two tests are normal, Pap tests can be done every three years (provided there are no abnormal findings), until the age of 69.<sup>5</sup>

The Pap test is uncomfortable for many women, both physically and emotionally. However, it is important to remember that regular (yearly) Pap tests can, and have, reduced the number of women who die from cervical cancer. Studies have shown that First Nations women do not get tested as often or as regularly as non-First Nations women. This is likely one of the reasons that more First Nations women die from cervical cancer.

## **It is not an exaggeration to say that regular Pap tests can save your life.**

If you are nervous or unsure about the Pap test, it might help to talk to a female friend or relative who has had one. Or, tell the nurse, doctor or CHR about your concerns and ask them to explain the process and its medical benefits.

### **Additional Resources**

If you would like more information about cervical cancer and the Pap test, please visit the following links:

Canadian Cancer Society, *What is cervical cancer?*

[http://www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/standard/0,2939,3172\\_10175\\_275922\\_langId-en,00.html](http://www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/standard/0,2939,3172_10175_275922_langId-en,00.html)

Health Canada, *Screening for Cervical Cancer*

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/cervical-uterus\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/cervical-uterus_e.html)

Canadian Women's Health Network, *Pap Tests*

<http://www.cwhn.ca/resources/faq/paptest.html>

College of Family Physicians of Canada, *Pap Smears: What they are and what the results mean*

<http://www.cfpc.ca/English/cfpc/programs/patient%20education/pap%20smear/default.asp?s=1>

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Cancer Society, *What is Cancer* (2006). Retrieved from:

[http://www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/standard/0,3182,3172\\_562847522\\_langId-en,00.html](http://www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/standard/0,3182,3172_562847522_langId-en,00.html)

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Cancer Society, *Media backgrounder: Canadian Cancer Statistics 2006 - Screening: Breast, colorectal, cervical* (2006). Retrieved from:

[http://www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/mediareleaselist/0,3208,3172\\_615815452\\_942212245\\_langId-en,00.html](http://www.cancer.ca/ccs/internet/mediareleaselist/0,3208,3172_615815452_942212245_langId-en,00.html)

<sup>3</sup> First Nations Centre, *Cancer of the Cervix in North American Indian Women: A literature review* (Ottawa: National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada, *What Everyone Should Know About HPV: Questions and Answers* (2006). Retrieved from: [http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/std-mts/hpv-vph/hpv-vph-qaqr\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/std-mts/hpv-vph/hpv-vph-qaqr_e.html)

<sup>5</sup> Health Canada, *Screening for Cervical Cancer* (2006). Retrieved from:

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/cervical-uterus\\_e.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/cervical-uterus_e.html)