

# About Cervical Cancer - A Quick Guide



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This is a brief summary of the information on 'About cervical cancer' from CancerHelp UK. You will find more detailed information on the website.

In this information there are sections on

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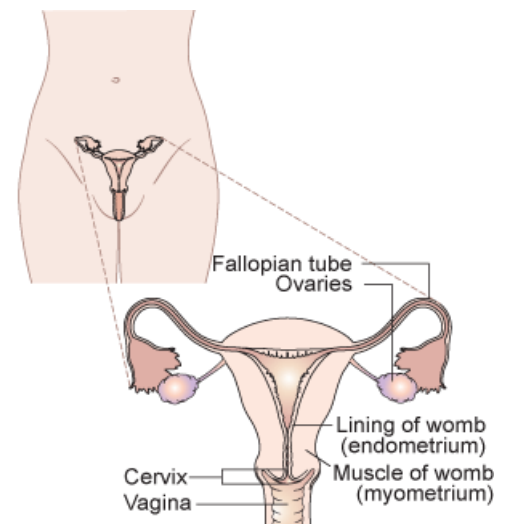


Diagram showing the parts of the female reproductive system  
Copyright © CancerHelp UK

## The cervix

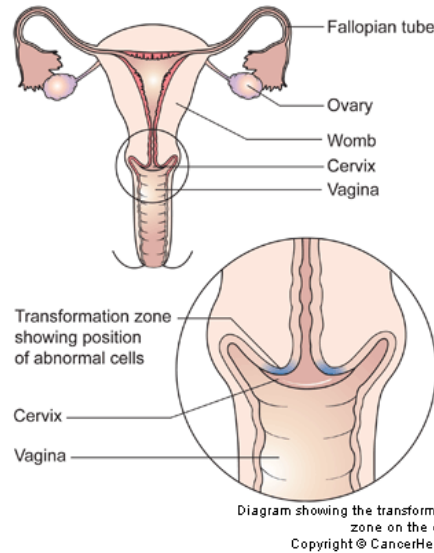
### Where and what is the cervix?

The cervix is another name for the neck of the womb. It is the opening to the womb from the vagina. It is really a strong muscle. Normally it is quite tightly shut, but during labour it opens up to let the baby out.

### The cells of the cervix

The cervix has a layer of skin-like cells on its outer surface. Cancer of these cells is called squamous cell cervical cancer. There are glandular cells lining the inside of the cervix. The glandular cells produce mucus. Cancer of these cells is called adenocarcinoma of the cervix.

The area where cervical cells are most likely to become cancerous is called the transformation zone. It is the area around the opening of the cervix that leads on to the narrow passageway running up into the womb.



## Lymph nodes

There are lymph nodes around the womb and cervix. The nearest large groups of lymph nodes are in the groin (at the top of each of your thighs). The lymph nodes are part of the lymphatic system. Tissue fluid that bathes the area containing the cancer will drain to the nearest lymph nodes. When you have surgery for cancer, your surgeon will usually take out some lymph nodes and send them to the lab to be checked for any cancer cells that have broken away from the tumour.

## Cervical cancer risks and causes

### HPV infection

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the major cause of cervical cancer. There are many different types of HPV. Some types of HPV cause genital warts and are sometimes called the genital wart virus. The types of HPV that cause warts are not the types that cause cervical cancer. Some other types of HPV are considered high risk for cancer of the cervix. HPV is passed on from person to another through sexual contact.

Women who get cervical cancer have had past infections with HPV. High risk types of HPV can cause changes in the cells covering the cervix that make them more likely to become cancerous in time. But most women infected with these viruses do NOT develop cervical cancer. So other factors must also be needed.

### Other risks

Women who smoke are more likely to get cervical cancer than those who don't. Taking the pill could increase a woman's risk of cervical cancer. It is not clear why this is. Women with a weakened immune system are also more likely to get cervical cancer and so are those who have had a large number of children.

### Cervical cancer screening

Cervical screening is very important because we can stop cervical cancer from developing. This is one of the few cancers that is preventable because pre cancerous cell changes can be picked up before they have a chance to develop into cancer.

The screening test involves a nurse or doctor taking a small sample of cells from the surface of your cervix. They do this by putting an instrument called a speculum inside your vagina and then scraping the cervix with a small brush. They put the brush and cells into a small pot of liquid and send it to the laboratory.

### Who is screened?

If you are between the ages of 25 and 60 in the UK, you will be contacted at least every 3 to 5 years and asked to go for a cervical screening test. The age that screening starts and finishes varies between the different countries of the UK.



## Screening test results

The test picks up pre cancerous changes. If you have an abnormal result, it does NOT mean that you have cervical cancer. But you may need further tests or treatment for abnormal cells.

## Cervical cancer symptoms

The most common symptom of cervical cancer is bleeding from the vagina at other times than when you are having a period. You may have bleeding

- Between periods
- After or during sex
- At any time if you are past your menopause

Some women also have

- A vaginal discharge that smells unpleasant
- Discomfort or pain during sex

There are many other conditions that cause these symptoms. Most of them are much more common than cervical cancer. But you should go to your doctor straight away if you have any of these symptoms. You probably don't have cancer. But if you do, the sooner you are treated, the more likely you are to be cured and usually the less treatment you will need to have.

Pre-cancerous cell changes do not usually have any symptoms. Which is why it is so important to have a regular smear test.

## Types of cervical cancer

There are two main types of cervical cancer

- Squamous cell cancer
- Adenocarcinoma

They are named after the type of cell that becomes cancerous. Squamous cells are the flat skin-like cells that cover the outer surface of the cervix. Squamous cell cancer is the most common type of cervical cancer.

Adenomatous cells are gland cells that produce mucus. Adenocarcinoma is a cancer of these gland cells. It is less common than squamous cell cancer, but has become more common in recent years. Between 1 in 10 and 1 in 20 cases of cervical cancer are adenocarcinoma. It is treated in the same way as squamous cell cancer of the cervix.

## Other rarer types of cancer

Very rarely, other types of cancer can occur in the cervix. For example, lymphoma which is a cancer of the lymphatic system. If you have this rare cancer, then this information is not the right one. There is a separate section on lymphoma and its treatment.

## Should I see a cervical cancer specialist?

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who may have something much less serious. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide which patients need to see a specialist urgently.

## What your GP should do first

Your GP should examine you internally if you have a change in your menstrual cycle, bleeding after sex, bleeding if you are past your menopause, or an abnormal discharge from your vagina. The GP should do a full internal examination of your vagina, using a



speculum so that they can see the cervix properly.

### Guidelines for urgent referral

You should ideally get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral. The symptoms that need urgent referral for possible cancer of the cervix are

- Any sign of cancer of the cervix your GP can see from an internal examination
- Heavy bleeding after the menopause in women not on hormone replacement therapy (HRT)
- Bleeding that is persistent or unexplained after stopping HRT for 6 weeks
- Repeated bleeding after sex or between periods for no apparent reason

If you are concerned that your GP is not taking your symptoms as seriously as you think they should, you could print this page and take it along to an appointment.

### What to ask your doctor about cervical cancer

- How will I know if I have cervical cancer?
- Am I more likely to get cervical cancer than anyone else?
- Will smoking affect my risk of cervical cancer?
- My mother had cervical cancer. Does this mean I am more likely to get it?
- Is there anything I can do to lower my risk of cervical cancer?
- How often should I have a smear test?
- I know this area screens every 5 years. Can I be screened more often if I wish to be?
- Who will give me the results of my smear test?
- Will the results be explained to me?
- I have had a hysterectomy. Do I still need smear tests?
- How are smears checked in this health authority?
- Is there an alternative to smear tests?
- I have had an abnormal smear. How long will I have to wait for treatment?



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## Notes

### More information

For more information about cervical cancer, visit our website  
<http://cancerhelp.cancerresearchuk.org>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for cancer trials in the UK. You can view or print the information in a larger size if you need to.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on **0808 800 4040** 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday

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