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Cervical Cancer - Risk Factors [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 04/2014

ON THIS PAGE: You will find out more about the factors that increase the chance of developing this type of cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen.

A risk factor is anything that increases a person's chance of developing cancer. Although risk factors often influence the development of cancer, most do not directly cause cancer. Some people with several risk factors never develop cancer, while others with no known risk factors do. However, knowing your risk factors and talking about them with your doctor may help you make more informed lifestyle and health care choices.

The following factors may raise a woman's risk of developing cervical cancer:

Human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection with HPV. This virus is most commonly passed from person to person during sexual activity. There are different types, or strains, of HPV, and some strains are more strongly linked with certain types of cancers. HPV vaccines protect against specific strains of the virus.

Immune system deficiency. Women with lowered immune systems have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. A lowered immune system can be caused by immune suppression from corticosteroid medications, organ transplantation, treatments for other types of cancer, or from the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which is the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). When a woman has HIV, her immune system is less able to fight off early cancer.

Herpes. Women who have genital herpes have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer.

Smoking. Women who smoke are about twice as likely to develop cervical cancer as women who do not smoke.

Age. Girls younger than 15 rarely develop cervical cancer. The risk goes up between the late teens and mid-30s. Women over 40 remain at risk and need to continue having regular cervical cancer screenings, which include both a Pap test [3] and HPV test.

Race. Cervical cancer is more common among black women, Hispanic women, and American Indian women.

Oral contraceptives. Some research studies suggest that oral contraceptives, which are birth control pills, may be associated with an increase in the risk of cervical cancer. However, more research is needed to understand how oral contraceptive use and the development of cervical cancer are connected.

Exposure to diethylstilbestrol (DES). Women whose mothers were given this drug during pregnancy to prevent miscarriage have an increased risk of developing a rare type of cancer of the cervix or vagina. DES was given for this purpose from about 1940 to 1970. Women exposed to DES should have an annual pelvic examination that includes a cervical Pap test [3] as well as a four-quadrant Pap test, in which samples of cells are taken from all sides of the vagina to check for abnormal cells.

Research continues to look into what factors cause this type of cancer and what women can do to lower their personal risk. There is no proven way to completely prevent this disease, but there may be steps you can take to lower your cancer risk. Talk with your doctor if you have concerns about your personal risk of developing this type of cancer.

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Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/cervical-cancer/risk-factors
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24638