

Vaginal Cancer - Overview [1]

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

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net's Guide to Vaginal Cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

About the vagina

The vagina or birth canal is the opening through which menstrual fluid leaves a woman's body and babies are born. It is connected to the cervix, which is the opening of the uterus or womb, and the vulva (folds of skin around its opening).

Usually, the vagina is in a collapsed position with its walls touching. The walls have many folds that allow the vagina to open and expand during sexual intercourse and vaginal childbirth. The vaginal lining is kept moist by mucus released from glands in the cervix.

The vaginal walls have a thin layer of cells called the epithelium, which contains cells called squamous epithelial cells. The vaginal wall, underneath the epithelium, is made up of connective tissue, involuntary muscle tissue, lymph vessels, and nerves.

About vaginal cancer

Vaginal cancer is an uncommon cancer of the female reproductive system. Vaginal cancer begins when normal cells in the vagina change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass called a tumor. A tumor can be cancerous or benign. A cancerous tumor is malignant, meaning it can spread to other parts of the body. A benign tumor means the tumor will not spread. There are four types of vaginal cancer:

Squamous cell carcinoma. Squamous cell carcinoma can develop in the cells lining the vagina, most often in the area closest to the cervix. Squamous cell carcinoma makes up 85% to 90% of vaginal cancers. It develops slowly through a precancerous condition (changes in cells that may, but do not always, become cancer) called vaginal intraepithelial neoplasia or VAIN.

Adenocarcinoma. Adenocarcinoma begins in the vaginal gland tissue. It makes up about 5% to 10% of vaginal cancers.

Clear cell adenocarcinoma. This cancer occurs in women whose mothers took the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) during pregnancy between the late 1940s and 1971. It is estimated that one woman out of 1,000 women exposed to DES will develop vaginal cancer.

Melanoma. Melanoma can also begin on the skin of the vagina or other internal organs. Melanoma is usually found on skin exposed to the sun and often appears as a dark-colored tumor on the lower or outer parts of the vagina. Learn more about [melanoma](#) [3].

To continue reading this guide, use the menu on the side of your screen to select another section.

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/vaginal-cancer/overview>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19251>