

## **Vaginal Cancer - Risk Factors and Prevention** [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 in this guide, use the colored boxes on the right side of your screen, or click [?Next?](#) at the bottom.

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 vaginal cancer:

**Age.** Squamous cell carcinoma most often occurs in women between 50 and 70 years old; approximately half of women with vaginal cancer are older than 60.

**Human papillomavirus (HPV).** Research indicates that infection with this virus is a risk factor for vaginal cancer. HPV 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. Many types of cancer caused by HPV are associated with precancerous conditions that develop before the cancer. HPV vaccines protect against specific strains of the virus. Learn more about [HPV and cancer](#) [3].

**Smoking** [4]. Smoking may increase a woman's risk of developing vaginal cancer.

**Diethylstilbestrol (DES).** Women whose mothers took this drug during their pregnancy between the late 1940s and 1971 have an increased risk of clear cell adenocarcinoma. The average age of diagnosis is 19. Because most women of mothers who took DES are now between 40 and 70, the number of cases has declined. However, the long-term risks of DES exposure are not known.

**Cervical cancer.** Women who have had [cervical cancer](#) [5] or cervical precancerous conditions have an increased risk of vaginal cancer.

**Previous radiation therapy.** Women who have had [radiation therapy](#) [6] in the vaginal area have an increased risk of vaginal cancer.

**Hysterectomy.** Women who have had a hysterectomy, which is the removal of part or all of the uterus, have an increased risk of vaginal cancer.

**Pessary use.** Long-term vaginal irritation from using a pessary can increase a woman's risk of vaginal cancer. A pessary is a device used to keep a sagging uterus in place.

## Prevention and Early Detection

All women should have an annual gynecologic examination. During this exam, the doctor will take a family medical history and perform a general physical examination of the pelvis, during which the doctor will feel a woman's uterus, vagina, cervix, and other reproductive organs to check for any unusual changes. Regular pelvic examinations can help detect cancer or precancerous conditions at an early stage.

In addition, research has shown that certain factors can help prevent vaginal cancer:

- Delaying first sexual intercourse until the late teens or older
- Avoiding sexual intercourse with multiple partners
- Avoiding sexual intercourse with someone who has had many partners
- Practicing safe sex, including condom use, although condoms cannot fully protect against HPV
- Having regular Pap tests (see [Diagnosis](#) [7]) to find and treat precancerous conditions
- Not starting to smoke
- [Quitting smoking](#) [4], if a smoker

Gardasil, a vaccine used to prevent cervical cancer for girls and women between ages 9 and 26, is also approved to prevent vaginal cancer. Gardasil helps prevent infection from the four most common strains or types of HPV. The vaccine does not protect people who are already infected with HPV.

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.

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

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/vaginal-cancer/risk-factors-and-prevention>

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

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24561>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25003>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/18674>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/30687>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19704>