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Recommendations for Cervical Cancer Screening and Pelvic Exams

What is the purpose of cervical cancer screening?

The purpose of cervical cancer screening is to identify abnormal cells which may lead to cancer. Cervical cancer is a leading cause of cancer death in women world wide. Screening has been shown to prevent death from cervical cancer by early identification and subsequent treatment to address the abnormalities found.

What are the screening tests for cervical cancer?

There are 2 tests available to screen for cervical cancer:

1. The Pap smear is a test in which a medical provider takes a sample of cells from the cervix with a soft brush. A pathologist then looks for pre-cancer and cancer cells in the sample under a microscope.
2. The HPV test evaluates for the presence of the Human Papilloma Virus on a sample taken from the cervix. Some types of this virus are known to cause cancer of the cervix.

Should I be screened for cervical cancer?

You should have a pap smear if you:

1. Are between the ages of 21 and 65.
2. Are older than 65 and have not had adequate screening in the prior 20 years or have had a history of cervical cancer or previous abnormalities called CIN 2 or CIN 3.

You may not need screening for cervical cancer if you:

1. Have never been sexually active as the risk is very low. However, it is encouraged that all women be tested as one study has shown that 0.3% of cervical cancers were in patients who denied ever being sexually active.
2. Are older than 65 and your last 3 Pap smears were within normal limits.
3. Have had a hysterectomy for non cancerous or benign reasons, such as bleeding from fibroids.

How do I lower or eliminate my risk for cervical cancer?

1. It should be emphasized that if both partners in a sexual relationship have never had any other sexual partners, the risk of cervical cancer is almost zero.
2. Get vaccinated against the HPV virus before initiating sexual activity.
3. Follow the screening recommendations for cervical cancer.

How often should I be screened for cervical cancer?

1. From age 21 to 29, a Pap smear should be done every 3 years.
2. Over age 30, a Pap should be done every 3 years. It can be extended to every 5 years if a HPV test is also done.
3. If you have an abnormal pap smear, the screening tests intervals are changed by your doctor depending on the severity of the abnormality.

What are the other reasons to have a pelvic examination (other than cervical cancer screening)?

Abnormal bleeding, pelvic pain, some kinds of back pain, and a sudden increase in abdominal size may indicate the presence of cancer of the uterus or ovaries. Routine pelvic examinations have not been shown in scientific studies to help in the early detection of these cancers, probably because they usually are accompanied by symptoms by the time they are detectable on an exam.

Some doctors or patients, for the sake of thoroughness or perhaps a strong family history of female cancers, will do or request a pelvic exam to be done, in hopes that it may lead to early detection of a female cancer even though the current scientific data and recommendations do not show a benefit.

Sources: American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, US Preventive Services Taskforce, ACS