Ready to start planning your care? Call us at 800-525-2225 to make an appointment.
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Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Make an Appointment
Back
Cervical Cancer
Refer a Patient

ABOUT US
Our mission, vision & core values
Leadership
History
Equality, diversity & inclusion
Annual report
Give to MSK

A Pap smear is done to check for abnormal cells (precancer) in your cervix or signs of cervical cancer. During a Pap smear, we use a plastic or metal tool to open your vagina and see your cervix. Next, we use a soft brush to get a sample of cells from your cervix. Your healthcare provider will send your sample to a lab for testing. They will suggest next steps for you if they find anything abnormal. A Pap smear usually isn't painful, but you may feel some discomfort during the test.

HPV Test

The HPV test looks for HPV, the virus that can cause cancer. Like a Pap smear, we use a soft brush to take a sample of cells from your cervix and your healthcare provider sends it to a lab for testing.

What is My Risk for Cervical Cancer?

Knowing your risk factors for cervical cancer is the first step in deciding whether screening is right for you. A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of getting a disease, such as cancer. People rarely get the disease if they don't have risk factors for cervical cancer. However, there are many risk factors.

A virus called HPV (human papillomavirus) is the main risk factor. Having HPV puts you at higher risk for cervical cancer. There are some things you can do to lower your risk of getting HPV:

- Use condoms and dental dams (a thin sheet that stops mouth-to-skin contact) during anal, vaginal, and oral sex. This lowers your risk of getting HPV.
- Get the HPV vaccine. Talk with your healthcare provider about whether the HPV vaccine is right for you.

Other factors that can put you at higher risk for cervical cancer include:

- Having sex for the first time at an early age.
- Having many sexual partners.
- Giving birth to 3 or more children.
- Smoking cigarettes.
- Using oral contraceptives (birth control pills) for a long time.

- Being infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- Having a weakened immune system.
- Having precancers or abnormal cells.
- Having a close blood relative with cervical cancer.
- If your mother took the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) while pregnant with you. DES is a form of estrogen given to some pregnant people between 1938 and 1971.

People without HPV infection or any other risk factor rarely get cervical cancer. Talk with your healthcare provider about your risks.

MSK's Screening Guidelines for Cervical Cancer

MSK recommends that people assigned female at birth who are at average risk get screened starting at age 21. This includes people of all genders, including transgender men.

- If you're 21 to 29 years old:
  - Have a Pap test every 3 years.
- If you're 30 to 65 years old, follow one of these guidelines:
  - Have a Pap test every 3 years.
  - Have a Pap test with an HPV test every 5 years.
  - Have an HPV test every 5 years.
- If you're older than age 65:
  - You do not need cervical cancer screening if you followed screening guidelines earlier.

If you are at higher risk, talk with your healthcare provider about getting screened more often.

Request an Appointment

Call 800-525-2225
Available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern time)

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PREVIOUS
Cervical Cancer Symptoms & Signs

NEXT
Cervical Cancer Diagnosis & Stages

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