

## **When to check?**

Currently, cervical cancer screening guidelines vary slightly from province to province and by expert groups. The following is a general summary of the recommendations provided by the Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care. Typically, all previously or currently sexually active women should be screened for cervical cancer (undergo a Pap test and pelvic exam) initially at age 25, and then every three years until the age of 70. Screening generally ends at 70 as long as there have been three negative Pap test results in the last 10 years. Cancer Care Ontario and the Canadian Cancer Society recommend screening starting at age 21, however. Your doctor can help you determine when screening should start and stop for you based on your risk factors and current health status. Women at higher risk may require testing more often. You may be considered high risk if you have:

- A family history of cervical cancer
- Previous abnormal Pap test results
- Taken birth control and/or the medication diethylstilbestrol (DES)
- Had frequent changes in sexual partners
- A weakened immune system
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV) (or have had it in the past)

Talk to your doctor about what is right for you.

## **What kind of screening is this?**

Pelvic exams with Pap tests are the most common screening measures for cervical cancer. You may experience some pain, pressure, discomfort, or nervousness during these procedures. To begin a pelvic exam, your doctor will examine the area outside of your vagina for any abnormalities. Next an instrument called a speculum will be gently inserted into the vagina so the cervix and upper part of your vagina can be seen. Your doctor will be able to visualize your cervix and vagina and observe any irregularities. The doctor will use a small stick to lightly scrape the lower surface of the cervix and collect some cells. Then, a small brush will be used to obtain cells from the upper portion of the cervix, closest to the uterus. Collecting a cell sample in this way is called a Pap test. The cells will then be sent to the lab for testing. After the doctor obtains the cell samples, the internal pelvic exam will continue. Placing two gloved fingers into the vagina and using the other hand to apply slight pressure to your belly, the doctor will examine your reproductive organs (i.e., cervix, vagina, uterus, and ovaries) for size, shape, and for the presence of any abnormalities. Additionally, your doctor may also perform a rectal exam to examine the anus and rectum for any irregularities.

## **Why?**

About 1 in 152 women are expected to develop cervical cancer in her lifetime, and 1 in 425 will die of it. Often, the symptoms of cervical cancer are hard to detect until the cancer has progressed. Sometimes the cells of the cervix change and become abnormal. Often these changes repair themselves, while other times they

do not. Having regular pelvic exams and Pap tests can increase the likelihood that abnormal changes to cervical cells can be caught early. Early detection means timely treatment and a greater chance of survival.

**Tell the doctor if you:**

1. Have been sexually active from a young age (include how many partners you have had)
2. Smoke
3. Have given birth to many children
4. Have been exposed to diethylstilbestrol (DES) before birth
5. Have human papillomavirus (HPV) or genital warts
6. Have a family history of cancer or have other pre-existing health conditions
7. Are taking medications (including birth control pills), over-the-counter drugs, prescription medications, vitamins, supplements, or natural health products (include duration of use)
8. Have abnormal bleeding, spotting, or bloodstained discharge between periods
9. Have heavy or prolonged periods
10. Experience bleeding and/or pain during and/or after sex
11. Have watery, putrid, or increased amounts of vaginal discharge
12. Experience pelvic pain and/or lower back pain