



Remember

Having Pap tests regularly:

- can find abnormal cell changes early
- helps prevent up to 90% of cervical cancer
- is important even if you are vaccinated against HPV



About the Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program

The Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program (ACCSP) is coordinated by Alberta Health Services in partnership with healthcare providers. The ACCSP mails Pap test results to women. The program also sends reminder letters if women are overdue for their next Pap test. The program operates in some parts of Alberta and will expand throughout the province in the near future. Visit screeningforlife.ca to find out whether the ACCSP sends letters to women in your area.

To get letters from the ACCSP your name and address must be up to date with Alberta Health and Wellness; call 310-0000 (toll free) then dial 780-427-1432.

Screening is one of the best things you can do for yourself to prevent cervical cancer. Breast, cervical, and colorectal cancer screening saves lives.

For more information, please contact

Cancer Screening Programs

Phone 1-866-727-3926

Fax 1-888-944-3388

screeningforlife.ca

OCTOBER 2009

CERVICAL SCREENING

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)
What You Need to Know And Do



SCREENING
FOR LIFE.CA



SCREENING
FOR LIFE.CA

PAP TEST SCREENING AND HPV VACCINATION CAN PREVENT MOST CERVICAL CANCER

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Canada and around the world. Taking some important steps can keep it from becoming a serious medical issue for you.

- HPV is a group of about 100 viruses that affect different parts of the body.
- About 45 types of HPV are spread by intimate skin-to-skin sexual contact.
- Over 70% of sexually active people will get HPV in their lifetime.
- Most people who are infected with HPV never show any symptoms. The body's immune system usually clears the virus within 2 years.

Does HPV cause cervical cancer?

About 15 high-risk types of HPV can cause cervical cell changes if the HPV infection does not go away. If untreated these cell changes can develop into cervical cancer over many years. Some low-risk types of HPV can cause genital warts when the virus does not clear on its own.

Most women who have HPV clear the virus and **do not** develop cervical cancer. A regular Pap test is the best way to find abnormal cells. If found early, abnormal cells can be followed closely. If needed, these abnormal cells can be treated so cervical cancer does not develop.

Regular Pap tests can find abnormal cells caused by HPV infections BEFORE they develop into cancer.

How does someone get HPV?

Genital HPV is spread easily by intimate skin-to-skin contact in the genital area. This includes touching, oral sexual activity, or intercourse with a partner of either sex.

HPV is very common. It can go undetected for many years. For most people, it is difficult to know when they were infected or who infected them.

Can HPV be treated?

Most HPV infections will clear on their own within 2 years. Although the HPV infection itself can't be treated, the effects of the virus can be.

- Speak with your healthcare provider to find out about genital wart treatment.
- Abnormal cervical cell changes caused by HPV can be treated to prevent cervical cancer. This is why it's important to have Pap tests regularly.

What is HPV testing?

When a woman 30 years or older is found to have borderline cell changes on her Pap test, the sample may also be tested for high-risk HPV. This test helps decide whether the woman should go for more specialized tests.

HPV testing is not recommended for women younger than 30. This is because HPV is very common in women younger than 30 and will usually clear on its own. Pap tests are still the best way to find abnormal cell changes.

The HPV test is fairly new in Canada and its use is still limited in Alberta. Talk to your healthcare provider if you would like more information about HPV testing.

What is the HPV vaccine?

HPV vaccine can prevent two types of HPV that cause about 70% of all cases of cervical cancer. The vaccine approved by Health Canada also prevents 90% of genital warts.

The vaccine works best when given before sexual activity begins, before any exposure to HPV. The Alberta HPV Immunization Program offers the vaccine to all girls in Grade 5. Until 2012, it will also be offered to girls in Grade 9. Women may benefit from the HPV vaccine even if they have been sexually active and may have been exposed to some types of HPV. The vaccine may protect them from the types of HPV they haven't been exposed to yet.

If you are thinking about getting the HPV vaccine or have questions:

- talk with your healthcare provider
- visit www.health.alberta.ca/health-info/imm-HPV.html

With the HPV vaccine, do I still need Pap tests?

Yes, you still need Pap tests regularly even if you are vaccinated against HPV. The HPV vaccine does not protect against all the types of HPV that cause cervical cancer.

What can I do to reduce my risk of getting HPV?

- Talk to your healthcare provider about the HPV vaccine.
- Even if you are vaccinated against HPV, get a Pap test regularly.
- Limit the number of sexual partners you have. Your partner's sexual history is also important.
- Use condoms. Although condoms work well to prevent other STIs, they offer less protection against HPV. HPV can be spread through skin-to-skin contact that condoms do not cover.
- Practice abstinence (no intimate skin-to-skin contact in the genital area).
- Understand that sexual activity at a young age increases your risk of being infected with HPV.

What can I do to reduce my risk of developing cervical cancer?

- If you have ever been sexually active you should have Pap tests regularly starting at age 21, or 3 years after becoming sexually active, whichever is later.
- Unless your healthcare provider tells you otherwise you should have a Pap test once a year for 3 years. If all 3 tests are normal you can start having your Pap tests once every 3 years.
- Protect yourself from HPV (see above).
- Don't smoke and limit second-hand smoke exposure. Tobacco use in women with HPV has been linked to a higher risk of cervical cancer.

