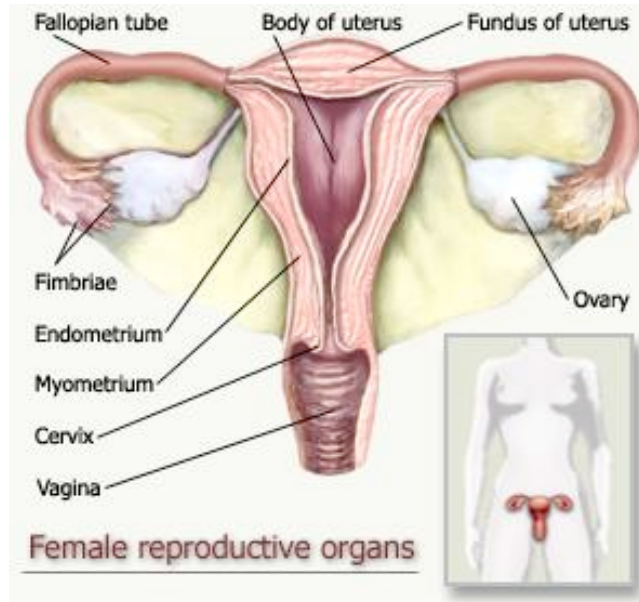


## Important Information about Cervical Cancer

### **What is the cervix?**

The cervix is the lower, narrow portion of the uterus where it joins with the top end of the vagina. It is cylindrical in shape and protrudes through the upper vaginal wall.

Approximately half its length is visible with appropriate medical equipment during a pelvic exam; the remainder lies above the vagina beyond view.



### **What is cervical cancer?**

All forms of cancer cause cells in the body to change and grow out of control. Most types of cells that change and grow out of control form a lump or mass called a tumor. The cells can invade and destroy healthy tissue. Cells from one area can break away and travel to other parts of the body. There they can continue to grow. This spreading process is called metastasis. When cancer spreads, it is still named after the part of the body where it started. For example, if breast cancer spreads to the lungs, it is still breast cancer, not lung cancer.

Normal



Cancerous



**Cervical cancer facts:**

Cervical cancer is the eighth leading cause of death in the U.S. As women get older, their risk for cervical cancer increases. That is why regular screening is important, even after a woman is no longer of child-bearing age. A virus called the human papillomavirus (or HPV) causes cervical cancer. A female gets infected with HPV when she has sexual contact. Most of the time, HPV has no symptoms so people do not know they have it. There are many different strains or types of HPV – some can cause cervical cancer in women, and other kinds of cancer in both women and men. Other types of HPV can cause genital warts in both males and females.

In most people, HPV goes away on its own without any treatment and does not cause health problems. Experts do not know why it acts differently in different people. We do know it is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the US and about 20 million people currently infected. Females in the US have an 80% chance of becoming infected by age 50.

While death from cervical cancer is less common than from breast cancer, about 130 women do die from it yearly. This is tragic since it is preventable if abnormal cell changes are detected by a Pap test and treated early.

Of the more than 100 types of HPV, over 30 types can be passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Although HPVs are usually transmitted sexually, doctors cannot say for certain when infection occurred. About 6 million new genital HPV infections occur each year in the United States. Most HPV infections occur without any symptoms and go away without any treatment over the course of a few years. However, HPV infection sometimes persists for many years, with or without causing detectable cell abnormalities.

**Reduce your risks:**

Cervical cancer is highly curable if detected early. Each death from cervical cancer is a tragedy – a tragedy worsened by the fact that most cases are preventable! Women can prevent cervical cancer if they do certain things. Make sure the women you care for in your life know about these protective behaviors as well.

First, young girls should delay having sex until they are adults. Next, selecting your sex partner carefully is important. Having multiple sex partners or having sex with partners who have multiple partners increases your risk for getting HPV. The safest relationships are only with one partner.

Get the HPV vaccine if you are 9-26 years old

Condoms do provide some protection, but they are not perfect. Smoking also increases risk for cervical cancer. So stop if you smoke. Finally, have regular Pap tests to make sure that any cell changes in the cervix will be found and treated early.

You cannot wait for symptoms to appear for cervical cancer. Early cell changes rarely have symptoms. Symptoms like abnormal bleeding usually mean the cervical cancer is already there.

### **What is a Pap test?**

A Pap test is a screening test that takes cells from the cervix and puts them onto a slide. The Pap test is done by the doctor or nurse within 1-2 minutes. The slide with the cells is then sent to a lab to be examined.

To have an accurate test, a female should not be having her period or have sex or put anything into her vagina for at least 2 days before the test.

### **What if I can't afford the test?**

Through the Georgia Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program, women may receive:

- A pelvic exam and a pap test,
- A clinical breast exam,
- A referral for a free mammogram,
- Diagnostic services if needed,

If diagnosed with either breast or cervical cancer, you may qualify for the Women's Health Medicaid Program that provides full Medicaid coverage during treatment for breast and cervical cancer.

Pass the word along...don't let lack of money or health insurance keep you or someone you know from getting needed breast and/or cervical cancer screening tests!

### **How often should I have a Pap test?**

Females need Pap tests on different schedules. Women younger than age 30 need a Pap test annually once they are age 21 or 3 years after they start having sex. However, if a woman age 30 or older has had three normal Pap tests in a row, she may only need the test every 2-3 years. The doctor or nurse will decide the best schedule for you.

The same is true for women who have had hysterectomies - the doctor or nurse will decide the best schedule.

### **What is the HPV vaccine?**

It is the first vaccine developed to prevent cervical cancer and genital warts caused by HPV. It works by protecting against the 4 types of HPV that most commonly cause these diseases. The vaccine is given in 3 doses over 6 months.

### **Who should get the HPV vaccine?**

Doctors recommend this vaccine for 11-12 year old girls. Older girls can still get the vaccine up to age 26.

Ideally, girls should get this vaccine before their 1st sexual contact when they could be exposed to HPV. The vaccine prevents disease in girls/women who have not previously gotten one or more types of HPV prevented by the vaccine. It does not work as well for those who were exposed to the virus before getting the vaccine.

According to the latest medical information, 1 in 4 girls in the US, between the ages of 14 and 19, have a sexually transmitted disease.

**Is the HPV vaccine effective?**

The vaccine is very effective (close to 100%)! It is highly effective in preventing the 4 most common types of HPV in young women who have not been previously exposed to them. HPV vaccine can reduce the number of cervical cancer cases by up to 70%! The vaccine will not treat existing HPV infections nor will they protect against other HPV types not included in the vaccine.

**If I get the HPV vaccine, will I still need a Pap test?**

Yes! Regular Pap tests are recommended for all women starting within 3 years of when a girl/woman begins sexual activity or turns 21, whichever comes first.

**Is condom protection necessary after I receive the HPV vaccine?**

YES! The HPV Vaccine will not protect against other STDs.

**Is the HPV vaccine safe?**

The HPV Vaccine has been studied in over 22,000 girls and women since 2001.

Before any vaccine is licensed, the FDA must determine that it is both safe and effective. Both Gardasil and Cervarix have been tested in thousands of people in the United States and many other countries. Thus far, no serious side effects have been noted. The most common problem has been brief soreness at the site of injection and other local injection site symptoms commonly experienced with other vaccines.

**Should pregnant women receive the HPV vaccine?**

NO! Pregnant women should wait to complete their pregnancy before getting the HPV vaccine.

**Where can I get the vaccine?**

Your local Health Department, from most pediatricians, and from some family practitioners & gynecologists.

**How do I pay for the vaccine?**

Many health insurances cover all or most of the cost. If your health insurance doesn't cover the HPV Vaccine or if you do not have insurance, you may qualify for Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program.

**What is the Vaccines For Children Program?**

This program provides free vaccines to children 18 years of age and younger who are either uninsured, underinsured for a particular vaccine, Medicaid or Peachcare eligible, an American Indian, or Alaska native. While the vaccine itself is free, there may be an administration fee charged of up to \$14.

**How long will protection last?**

Scientists have studied this vaccine since Dec. 2001. As with all vaccines, medical scientists will continue to study this vaccine as long as it exists. If it is determined a booster shot is needed, it will be widely publicized.