

## What is Cervical Cancer?

- The cervix is the lower part of the uterus that connects the uterus to the vagina
  - It produces mucus to protect the upper reproductive organs from bacteria and prevents the entry of sperm into the uterus during most of the menstrual cycle
- The cervix also dilates, or widens, to facilitate childbirth
- Cells in the cervix may become pre-cancerous or develop into cancer
  - These cells can spread, or metastasize, to other parts of the body such as the uterus, bladder, lungs, or bone
- In 2021, it was estimated that 1450 Canadians would be diagnosed with cervical cancer with 380 deaths.

## What are the symptoms of Cervical Cancer?

- Cervical cancer may not have any symptoms until it spreads to other tissues and organs
  - Thus, it is very important to be screened for cervical cancer via a Pap test
- Some symptoms of cervical cancer include abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge, pain during intercourse, difficulty urinating or having a bowel movement, loss of appetite, weight loss, shortness of breath, and fatigue
- The main risk factor for cervical cancer is infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV).

## What is HPV?

- HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Canada
  - HPV can be transmitted during vaginal, oral, or anal sex, or intimate skin-to-skin contact
  - It is estimated that up to 75% of sexually active people will be infected with anogenital HPV in their lifetime
  - While most people will clear the infection naturally, a small amount of people will develop cancer.
- HPV infection may not have any symptoms
  - A common symptom is anogenital warts, which may look like a small cauliflower or be flat
    - These warts may be inside the body or be too small to be seen
  - HPV causes almost all cervical cancers, but is also related to cancer of the throat, oral cavity, penis, anus, vagina, or vulva
  - In Canada, Gardasil®, Gardasil®9 (for females and males) and Cervarix® (for females only) are vaccines that are both safe and effective in preventing HPV infection and associated changes in the cervix.

## How is Cervical Cancer Detected?

- The Pap test is performed to look for changes in the cells of the cervix and detect cervical cancer
- During this in-office test, a doctor will collect a small sample of cells from the surface of your cervix
  - The sample will be sent to a lab for examination under a microscope.

## When do I need a pap test?

- The guidelines for when to have a Pap test vary from province to province
  - In Alberta in 2022, it is recommended that people with female reproductive organs aged 25 to 69 have a Pap test every three years
- Those under 25 years old do not require routine screenings.
- If you are 70 or older and have had three negative pap tests in a row in the last 10 years, screening is no longer needed.

## What if my pap test results are abnormal

- An abnormal Pap test result does not always indicate cervical cancer
- It may mean that you have changes on your cervix that could go away on their own
- In some cases, these changes could lead to cervical cancer
  - Abnormal results may also be due to infection of the vagina or cervix, low estrogen levels after menopause, or an IUD
  - If your test is abnormal, you may need another pap test within a few weeks or months
  - If pre-cancer is suspected, your doctor may recommend a colposcopy, a procedure where the cervix is examined with a magnifying instrument called a colposcope
  - During this procedure, the doctor may take a biopsy from the cervix that will be sent to the lab for analysis.

## References:

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