

Cancer of the vagina

What is the vagina?

The vagina is part of a woman's reproductive organs. It is the passage connecting the neck of the womb (the cervix) to a woman's external sexual organs. Menstrual blood leaves the body via the vagina and a baby is born through the vagina.

What is cancer of the vagina?

Cancer occurs when abnormal cells grow and divide. The area where cancer begins to grow is called the 'primary' site, or primary cancer. When cancer spreads to other parts of the body it is called a secondary cancer. Cancer of the vagina can be primary or secondary, but the most common cancers of the vagina are secondary cancers.

The most common primary vaginal cancer is squamous cell cancer, which occurs high up in the vagina. Another vaginal cancer, adenocarcinoma, usually affects younger women, although older women can also get this primary cancer.

Secondary cancers can spread to the vagina from the cervix, the endometrium (or lining of the womb), or from organs close to the vagina, such as the bladder.

How common is it?

Cancer of the vagina is very rare.

What are the causes?

As with many cancers, the exact cause of most vaginal cancers is unknown. Vaginal cancers are not infectious, so cannot be passed on to others. Some possible contributing factors include:

The human papilloma virus (HPV), which is the name for a group of wart viruses, is a risk factor for vaginal cancer. HPV is a common infection affecting the skin surface of any part of the body, including the vagina and the cervix.

Women who have had cervical cancer or pre-cervical cancer in the past are more likely to get vaginal cancer.

Women who have had radiotherapy to the pelvic area also have a slightly higher risk. But this complication of radiotherapy is very rare, and women who have had this treatment still only have a tiny risk of developing vaginal cancer.

A drug called diethylstilbestrol (DES) has been identified as a cause of a particular type of cancer of the vagina called clear cell adenocarcinoma. DES is a synthetic form of the female hormone, oestrogen.

Between 1940 and 1971, DES was prescribed to pregnant women to try to prevent miscarriages. The female children of women who took DES during

pregnancy have a slightly increased risk of developing clear cell adenocarcinoma. (Only one in 1000 'DES daughters' develop vaginal cancer. The incidence peaked in the 1970s and is now decreasing.) DES has also been associated with the development of some breast cancers.

Although DES and some other female hormones (oestrogens) can be safely used to treat some other medical conditions, DES is no longer used during pregnancy.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding cancer of the vagina* on www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php

Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20