

# Cervical Cancer

## **What is cervical cancer?**

Cervical cancer is a malignant tumour in the tissues of the cervix. The cervix is the lower section or 'neck' of the uterus and it connects a woman's vagina to her uterus.

Cervical cancer does not usually show symptoms until it is quite advanced, so the best way to detect it early is with a Pap smear. The Pap smear can also detect precancerous changes to the cells in your cervix, called dysplasia, which can be treated before they become cancerous.

The two main types of cervical cancer are named after the type of cell from which they start:

**Squamous cell carcinoma**—This is the most common cervical cancer, accounting for 80% of all cervical cancers. It starts in the squamous or skin-like cells of the cervix.

**Adenocarcinoma**—This is a less common type of cervical cancer, which develops from the glandular cells up high in the cervix. This type is more difficult to diagnose because it starts in an area that may not be reached by the brush or spatula used in a Pap smear.

Both types of cervical cancer are treated in a similar way.

## **What causes cervical cancer?**

The causes of cervical cancer are unknown; however, the following factors increase the chance of developing cervical cancer.

(HPV) Human papilloma virus is the name for a group of wart viruses that are implicated in cervical cancer. HPV is a common infection affecting the skin surface of any part of the body, including the vagina and cervix. More than 100 types of the virus have been identified, but only some affect the genital area.

Around eight out of 10 women will get HPV at some time in their lives and, for most, it will clear up on its own. Other women only find out they have HPV if it shows up on a Pap smear, because HPV often causes no symptoms. While some women will develop cervical cancer even though they do not have HPV, most women with cervical cancer do have HPV.

Having the HPV does not mean you will get cervical cancer. Only a few types of HPV will develop into cervical cancer and most women who have HPV will never get cervical cancer.

A major breakthrough in preventing cervical cancer has been the development of a vaccine to protect women from contracting some strains of HPV. It is most effective if administered before a woman becomes sexually active.

It is important to note, though, that the vaccine is not a replacement for a regular Pap screening test as this is still the most effective way to find and combat cervical cancer.

Smoking is also implicated in developing cervical cancer. Smoking produces chemicals that may damage the cells of the cervix and make cancer more likely to develop.

While the characteristics outlined above might contribute to a woman developing cancer of the cervix, some women get cervical cancer without having any of these factors.

**How common is it?**

In Tasmania, cervical cancer is diagnosed in about 14 women each year. One in 150 women will develop cervical cancer by the age of 75 years.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding cervical cancer* on [www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof\\_patient.php](http://www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php)

**Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20**