

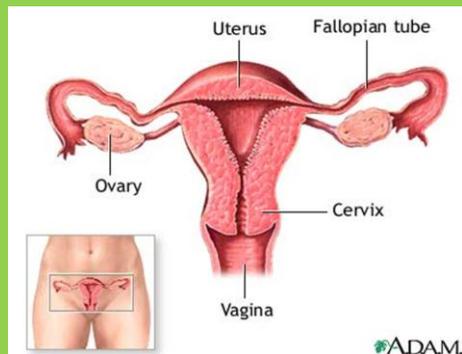
CERVICAL CANCER is one of the most commonly diagnosed cancers in women and one of the leading causes of death from cancer in the Caribbean. The good news is that almost all cases of cervical cancer are preventable. Read on to learn more about cervical cancer.

What is *cervical cancer*?

Our body consists of cells. Normal cells grow, multiply, and die in an orderly manner and are replaced by new cells. Cancer cells do not die but continue to multiply in a disorderly manner. Over time, they can form a mass that may be malignant, in other words cancerous. Cervical cancer develops when this process occurs in the cells lining the cervix.

What is the cervix?

The cervix is a part of the female reproductive system. It is the lower part of the uterus (womb). The cervix opens to allow a baby to pass through the vagina during childbirth.



What increases my risk?

A *RISK FACTOR* increases the likelihood that you will develop a disease. Having a risk factor does not mean that you *will* develop a disease. Different cancers have different risk factors. Risk factors for cervical cancer include:

Human Papillomavirus Virus (HPV) – Exposure to a persistent HPV infection is the cause of almost all cases of cervical cancer. HPV is a group of viruses of which more than 30 strains are transmitted by skin-to-skin exposure during intimate sexual contact. Anyone who has ever been intimate with another person is at risk for developing the disease whether or not sexual intercourse has occurred.

Age – Cervical cancer usually occurs in women under the age of 50.

Tobacco – Women who smoke are twice as likely as a non-smoker to develop cervical cancer.

Oral Contraceptive – Use of oral contraceptives (the “pill”) for longer than five (5) years leads to an increase in risk. However, there are other benefits to taking the “pill” so discuss the pros and cons of this with your doctor before stopping use.

Multiple Pregnancy – The more times a woman has been pregnant the greater her risk of developing cervical cancer.

Weakened Immune System – Women who may have a compromised immune system

because of exposure to viruses such as HIV or infections such as Chlamydia will be at increased risk. This is also true if a woman’s immune system is weakened because of an organ transplant or other medical condition
Sexual Practices – The earlier a woman begins to engage in intimate sexual contact and the more partners she has over the course of her lifetime the greater her risk of developing cervical cancer. This risk is greater if her partners have also had multiple partners. One reason for this is it increases the likelihood of transmission of HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases that might weaken a woman’s immune system.

Family History – A woman who has a mother or sister diagnosed with cervical cancer is twice as likely to develop cervical cancer as a woman with no family history of the disease.

Diet – There is evidence to suggest that women who have a diet low in fruits and vegetables may be at increased risk for cervical cancer.

Diethylstilbestrol (DES) Exposure – DES was given to women during the 1970s to decrease the risk of miscarriage. Women who took DES and their daughters are at increased risk of developing cervical cancer.

What decreases my risk?

Any factor that lowers your risk of developing a disease is a *PROTECTIVE FACTOR*. These factors do not guarantee that a disease will not develop. Different cancers have different protective factors. Protective factors for cervical cancer prevention include:

HPV Vaccination – If you are between the ages of 9 and 26 years, talk with your medical provider about the HPV vaccine.

Sexual Practices – Avoid activities that will increase your risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases by delaying the onset of intimate sexual contact and limiting the number of partners you have over the course of your lifetime. Use condoms.

Tobacco – Avoid using tobacco products to reduce risk.

Screening – See below.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Early cervical cancer often has no signs or symptoms. As the disease progresses you may notice:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding between your monthly periods, after you have experienced menopause or after sexual intercourse
- Abnormal discharge that may have a smell
- Pain during intercourse
- Pelvic pain

Screening

Screening tests are done on persons who have no signs or symptoms of a disease.

Screening for cervical cancer can detect abnormal changes of cervical cells before cancer has developed. The screening test for cervical cancer used in the Cayman Islands is the Pap smear.

The Cayman Islands Cancer Society recommends that a woman have her first Pap smear within two years of becoming sexually active OR if she is still a virgin at the age of 21, she should have her first Pap smear then. After that, a woman should have a Pap smear every two (2) years OR as recommended by her doctor.

Pap smear

A trained medical practitioner can do a Pap smear in a doctor's office or health center. The procedure involves the collection of cells from the surface of the cervix, which are examined in a laboratory.

When you go for a Pap smear, wear a two-piece outfit, as you will be asked to undress from the waist down. You will lie down on an examination table and the medical practitioner will insert a speculum into your vagina to widen it. This will allow for easy visual inspection of the cervix and collection of the cell sample with a small brush or wooden swab. The sample will be placed either on a glass slide or in a liquid solution.

You can increase the accuracy of the results by:

- Avoiding having the test done when you have your period.
- Not douching for 48 hours before the test.
- Not having sexual intercourse for 48 hours before the test.
- Not using vaginal medicines (except as directed by your doctor), birth control foams, creams or jellies for 48 hours prior to the test.

Remember that a Pap smear tests for cervical cancer only. It cannot tell if you have other types of cancer.

Pap smears in the Cayman Islands

If you cannot afford a Pap smear, you can contact the Cayman Islands Cancer Society who will provide you with a voucher for a free Pap smear. The procedure will be done by a doctor in his or her office. The voucher is for this test only.

Pelvic exam

All women are encouraged to have a pelvic exam as a part of a well-woman health check. During a pelvic exam, a medical practitioner inserts a gloved hand into your vagina and places the other hand on your abdomen. S/he is able to feel for any abnormalities in the size or shape of your uterus and ovaries. A pelvic exam is not a test for cervical cancer.

Contact us

For more information on our programs and the Society, we invite you to visit our office between the hours of 9am and 4pm, Monday – Friday.

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About the Cayman Islands Cancer Society

The Cayman Islands Cancer Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to preventing the development of cancer through its education programs and screening initiatives as well as to providing financial assistance to cancer patients and their families with treatment related expenses. The Society also offers counseling and support to cancer patients and their families. The Society funds its programs through donations and fundraising events.

