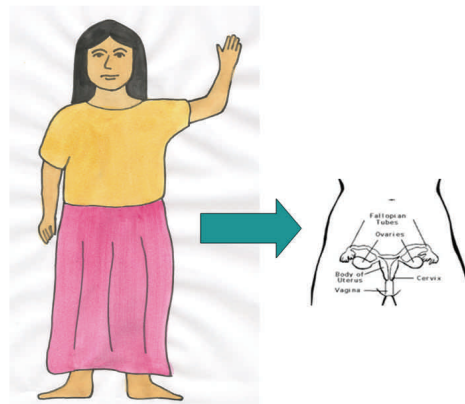




## What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer begins when cells of the cervix grow uncontrollably and form a tumor.

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb). It is sometimes called the uterine cervix. The body (upper part) of the uterus is where a fetus grows. The cervix connects the body of the uterus to the vagina



## Why is cervical cancer a concern for American Indian women?

Native Americans have a high rate of cervical cancer because they are less likely to receive a Pap smear for early detection of cancerous cells.

## What causes cervical cancer?

Cancers can be caused by gene defects that turn on tumor promoting genes (oncogenes) or turn off tumor suppressor genes. Scientists now think that the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) causes the production of 2 proteins known as E6 and E7. When these proteins are produced, they turn off some tumor suppressor genes. This may allow the cervical lining cells to grow uncontrollably, which in some cases will lead to cancer.

## What are the risk factors of cervical cancer?

- **Human papilloma virus infection:** The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection by the *human papilloma virus* (HPV). HPV is passed from one person to another during skin-to-skin contact. HPV can be spread during sex - including vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, and even during oral sex.
- **Smoking:** Smoking exposes the body to many cancer-causing chemicals that are absorbed by the lungs and carried in the bloodstream throughout the body.
- **Immunosuppression:** : Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS, damages the body's immune system and seems to make women more at risk for HPV infections.

- **Diet:** Women with diets low in fruits and vegetables may be at increased risk for cervical cancer.
- **Oral contraceptives (birth control pills):** There is evidence that taking oral contraceptives (OCs) for a long time increases the risk of cancer of the cervix.
- **Multiple pregnancies:** Women who have had many full-term pregnancies have an increased risk of developing cervical cancer.
- **Low socioeconomic status:** Many women with low incomes do not have ready access to adequate health care services, including Pap tests. This means they may not get screened or treated for pre-cancerous cervical disease.
- **Diethylstilbestrol (DES):** DES is a hormonal drug that was given to some women to prevent miscarriage between 1940 and 1971. Women whose mothers took DES (when pregnant with them) developed cancer of the cervix.
- **Family history of cervical cancer:** If your mother or sister had cervical cancer, your chances of developing the disease are increased by 2 to 3 times.

### What can you do to prevent cervical cancer?

#### 1. Avoid being exposed to HPV:

Certain types of sexual behavior increase a woman's risk of getting HPV infection:

- having sex at an early age
- having many sexual partners
- having a partner who has had many sex partners

2. **Delay sex:** Waiting to have sex until you are older can help you avoid HPV.

3. **Use condoms:** Condoms provide some protection against HPV.

4. **Don't smoke:** Not smoking is another important way to reduce the risk of cervical pre-cancer and cancer.

5. **Get vaccinated:** Vaccines have been developed that can protect young women from HPV infections.

6. **Get a Pap Test:** A Pap Test can detect pre-cancers.

### What are the signs/symptoms of cervical cancer?

Symptoms of cervical cancer may include:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding or a significant unexplained change in your period.
- Bleeding during sexual intercourse or insertion of a diaphragm.
- Pain during sexual intercourse.
- Abnormal vaginal discharge containing mucus that may be tinged with blood.

If you have these symptoms, it is very important to see your health care provider.

The information in the Gathering Basket education materials is not intended as medical



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