



Rutland Women's Healthcare

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Cervical Health Awareness Month

by Sarah E. Decker, MD, Rutland Women's Healthcare

Did you know that January is Cervical Health Awareness Month and that cervical cancer is preventable? Each year, in the United States 13,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer. Cervical cancer develops over many years, therefore with regular screening, it is preventable. Certain factors can make one woman more likely to get cervical cancer than another woman. These are called risk factors. Risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- **HPV infection.** Some of the human papillomaviruses (HPV) put women at higher risk for cervical cancer. These viruses can be transmitted by sexual contact. Persistent HPV infection is the major risk factor for cervical cancer.
- **Smoking.** A woman who smokes has a higher chance of getting cervical cancer.
- **Weakened immune systems.** Women who have the HIV virus, which causes AIDS, and those who have weakened immune systems for other reasons (like a recent organ transplant or exposure to certain medicines) are at greater risk of getting cervical cancer. This is because conditions that affect the immune system make it harder for the body to deal with HPV infection.
- **Chlamydia infection.** This is a sexually-transmitted bacterial infection that has been linked to an increased risk for cervical cancer.
- **Diet.** A diet low in fruits and vegetables may increase the risk for cervical cancer.
- **Oral contraceptives.** A woman who has taken oral contraceptives for a long time may have a higher risk.
- **Many pregnancies.** A woman who has had many full-term pregnancies may be at greater risk.
- **DES.** If a woman's mother took the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) when she was pregnant, the woman has a greater chance of getting cervical cancer.
- **Socioeconomic status.** Many women with low incomes don't have access to good health care. This may prevent regular screenings and increase their risk of cervical cancer.
- **Sexual history.** A higher number of sexual partners and first intercourse at an early age are associated with an increased risk for cervical cancer.

What can a woman do to decrease her risk of getting cervical cancer? Regular Pap tests are very important in finding cervical changes early, when they can be more easily treated. These are things women can do to decrease their risk:

- **Talk with a healthcare provider about when to go for checkups.** It is recommended for women who are age 21 and older to have regular cervical cancer screening tests; for most women these are recommended every three years.
- **Quit smoking.**
- **Eat a well-balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables.**
- **Avoid intercourse at a young age.**
- **Discuss the HPV vaccine with your healthcare provider and with your children's pediatrician.** (The vaccine is recommended for young boys and girls between the ages of 9 and 26. Early vaccination prior to having sex provides greater protection.)
- **Use condoms during intercourse.**
- **Limit the number of sexual partners.**

Cervical cancer is a preventable cancer. You can prevent it by vaccinating early, getting your Pap test regularly, and having an HPV test when recommended by your healthcare provider.