

LIFE MATTERS



Cancer: Be informed and take action now – Your guide to Cervical Cancer

Reducing your risk for cancer may be easier than you think. Sometimes it requires little more than a few lifestyle changes to make all the difference in the world.

And, while, yes, you, people can still get cancer even though they do all “the right” things, research tells us that nearly half of all cancers are linked to avoidable factors that we can control.

Cervical Cancer Awareness Month is commemorated annually in September to encourage women to do screening and prevent the cancer. The goal of screening for cervical cancer is to find cervix cell changes and early cervical cancers before they cause symptoms.

Cervical cancer affects roughly one in 41 South African women, and Statistics South Africa estimates that 16.84-million women over the age of 15 are at risk of the disease in this country. At present, roughly eight South African women die from the disease every day, and the World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that this figure could rise to 12 by 2025. If you’ve never had a pap smear, you need to read this article; it could save your life or the life of someone you love.

[What is Cervical Cancer?](#)

Cervical Cancer is a type of cancer that occurs in the cells of the cervix; the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina.

Various strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted infection, play a role in causing most cervical cancer.

When exposed to HPV, a woman's immune system typically prevents the virus from doing harm. In a small group of women, however, the virus survives for years, contributing to the process that causes some cells on the surface of the cervix to become cancer cells.

Causes

Cervical cancer begins when healthy cells acquire a genetic change (mutation) that causes them to turn into abnormal cells.

Healthy cells grow and multiply at a set rate, eventually dying at a set time. Cancer cells grow and multiply out of control, and they don't die. The accumulating abnormal cells form a mass (tumor). Cancer cells invade nearby tissues and can break off from a tumor to spread (metastasize) elsewhere in the body.

It isn't clear what causes cervical cancer, but it's certain that HPV plays a role. HPV is very common, and most women with the virus never develop cervical cancer. This means other factors, such as your environment or your lifestyle choices, also determine whether you'll develop cervical cancer.

Risk Factors:

Risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- Many sexual partners. The greater your number of sexual partners and the greater your partner's number of sexual partners, the greater your chance of acquiring HPV.
- Early sexual activity. Having sex at an early age increases your risk of HPV.
- Other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Having other STIs such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis and HIV/AIDS, increases your risk of HPV.
- A weak immune system. You may be more likely to develop cervical cancer if your immune system is weakened by another health condition and you have HPV.
- Smoking. Smoking is associated with squamous cell cervical cancer.



Symptoms of Cervical Cancer

As in many cancers, you may have no signs or symptoms of cervical cancer until it has progressed to a dangerous stage. They may include:

- Pain, when the cancer is advanced

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding (other than during menstruation)
- Abnormal vaginal discharge
- Pelvic pain
- Kidney failure due to a urinary tract or bowel obstruction, when the cancer is advanced

Some risk factors for cancer can be avoided, however, this is not the case for many others.

For example, both smoking and inheriting certain genes are risk factors for some types of cancer, but only smoking can be avoided.

Regular exercise and a healthy diet may be protective factors for some types of cancer. Avoiding risk factors and increasing protective factors may lower your risk but it does not mean that you will not get cancer.

There are different ways to prevent cancer some include:

- Changing lifestyle or eating habits
- Avoiding things known to cause cancer
- Taking medicines to treat a precancerous condition or to keep cancer from starting
- Knowing your risk markers beforehand.

Your Health Matters

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