

Patient education: Cervical cancer (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is cervical cancer? — Cervical cancer happens when normal cells in the cervix change into abnormal cells, and grow out of control ([figure 1](#)). Most women whose cervical cancer is found and treated early do very well. The cervix is the bottom part, or neck, of the uterus.

What are the symptoms of cervical cancer? — Cervical cancer might not cause any symptoms at first. When it does cause symptoms, it can cause vaginal bleeding that occurs:

- In between menstrual cycles (meaning the bleeding happens when a woman is not having her period)
- After sex
- After menopause

These symptoms can also be caused by conditions that are not cancer. But if you have vaginal bleeding at these times, tell your doctor or nurse.

Is there a test for cervical cancer? — Yes. A Pap test (also called a "Pap smear") is used to screen women for cervical cancer. For this test, your doctor or nurse props open the walls of your vagina using a device that looks like a duck beak (called a speculum). He or she will then use a small brush to collect cells from the cervix. A doctor will look at the cells under a microscope to see if they are abnormal. Depending on your age, the doctor will also do a test for a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). Infection with HPV can cause cervical cancer.

If the test results are abnormal, the doctor will follow up with a test called a biopsy. During a biopsy, the doctor will remove a tiny piece of abnormal-looking tissue from the cervix. To see the cervix better during a biopsy, the doctor will use a magnifying lens called a "colposcope."

Doctors sometimes find cells in the cervix that are not cancer, but are abnormal and have a high chance of turning into cancer. If you have these "pre-cancer" cells, your doctor can treat them in different ways. He or she might remove them to prevent them from turning into cancer. Or he or she might watch them closely over time.

What is cervical cancer staging? — Cancer staging is a way in which doctors find out how far a cancer has spread.

The right treatment for you will depend a lot on the stage of your cancer, your age, and other health problems. Your treatment will also depend on whether you might want to get pregnant in the future.

How is cervical cancer treated? — Cervical cancer can be treated in different ways. These include:

- **Surgery** – Cervical cancer is usually treated with surgery to remove the cancer. Different types of surgery can involve:

- Removing the cervix, uterus, and upper part of the vagina – This is called a "radical hysterectomy" ([figure 2](#)).
- Removing all or part of the cervix but leaving the uterus in place – This type of surgery is done only in special situations.
- **Radiation therapy** – Radiation kills cancer cells.
- **Chemotherapy** – Chemotherapy is the medical term for medicines that kill cancer cells or stop them from growing. Women with cervical cancer usually receive chemotherapy at the same time as radiation therapy.

What if I want to get pregnant one day? — If you want to have a baby one day, talk with your doctor before having treatment. Some women can still get pregnant after being treated for cervical cancer. But, a woman cannot get pregnant after some types of treatment, such as a hysterectomy, radiation therapy, or some types of chemotherapy.

Women are often able to get pregnant after other types of treatment. But they usually need to wait 6 to 12 months before they start trying to get pregnant, because their body needs time to heal.

What happens after treatment? — After treatment, you will be checked every so often to see if the cancer comes back. Follow-up tests can include exams, Pap tests, and X-rays.

What happens if the cancer comes back or spreads? — If the cancer comes back or spreads, you might have more surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy.

What else should I do? — It is important to follow all your doctor's instructions about visits and tests. It's also important to talk to your doctor about any side effects or problems you have during treatment.

Getting treated for cervical cancer involves making many choices, such as which type of surgery to have.

Always let your doctors and nurses know how you feel about a treatment. Any time you are offered a treatment, ask:

- What are the benefits of this treatment? Is it likely to help me live longer? Will it reduce or prevent symptoms?
- What are the downsides to this treatment?
- Are there other options besides this treatment?
- What happens if I do not have this treatment?

Can cervical cancer be prevented? — In many cases, yes. Almost all cervical cancer is caused by a virus called HPV (human papillomavirus) that is spread through skin-to-skin contact and sex. Vaccines that prevent people from getting infected with HPV are now available. Ask your doctor if and when you should get an HPV vaccine. This vaccine is available for men and women, and works best if a person receives it before he or she starts having sex. Also, treating precancer cells can keep them from turning into cervical cancer.

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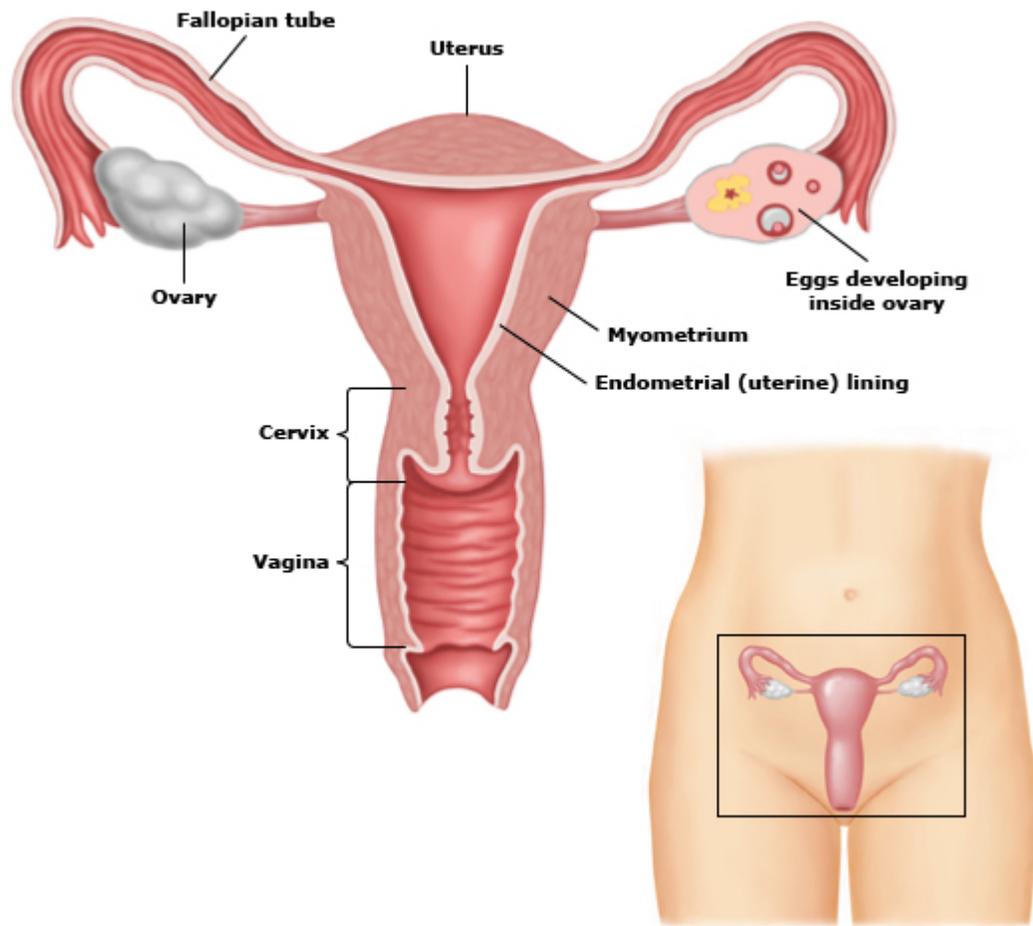
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GRAPHICS

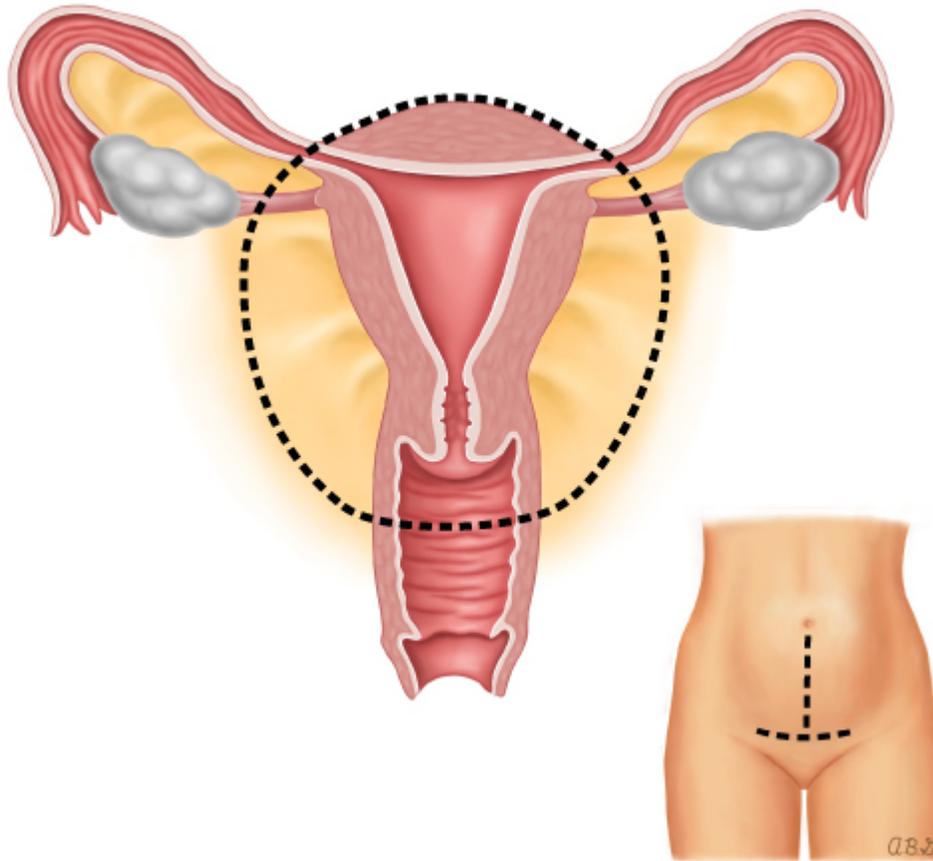
Female reproductive anatomy



These are the internal organs that make up a woman's reproductive system.

Graphic 80271 Version 5.0

Radical hysterectomy



During a radical hysterectomy, the surgeon removes the uterus and cervix, some of the tissue around the uterus and cervix, and a part of the vagina. It is not always necessary to remove the ovaries. The surgery is usually done through an opening in the belly. But it can also be done "laparoscopically". To do a laparoscopic hysterectomy, the surgeon inserts a tiny camera and tools through small openings in the belly. Then he or she removes the uterus and other tissues through the vagina.

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