

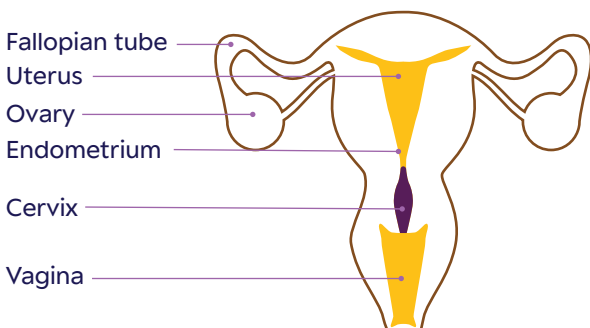
Cervical Cancer

What you should know

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is when normal cells in the lining of your cervix grow in an abnormal way to form a swelling called a tumour.

Your cervix is the opening to your uterus (womb) from the vagina. It is often called the 'neck' of the uterus. It is shaped like a tube and is about 2.5cm (1 inch) long. Usually your cervix is closed, but it opens during labour to allow for birth.



Cervical cancer facts

- ▶ Around 250 cases of cervical cancer are diagnosed in Ireland each year.
- ▶ Cervical cancer is most common in women under the age of 50.
- ▶ Screening won't prevent all cases of cervical cancer but, along with the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination, cervical screening is the best way to protect against cervical cancer.

We use the word 'women' to talk about how many people get cervical cancer (incidence), as this is how statistics are recorded.

What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

- ▶ Abnormal vaginal bleeding: heavier periods, bleeding in between your periods, after sex or after the menopause.
- ▶ An abnormal vaginal discharge that may smell unpleasant.
- ▶ Discomfort or pain during sex, or in the pelvic area.
- ▶ Recurring urinary tract infections (UTIs).
- ▶ Pain in your lower tummy or back.

These symptoms are usually caused by other things, but always get them checked out.

What should I do if I have any symptoms?

If you have any symptoms or changes in your body that you are worried about, it's important to have them checked by your GP (family doctor). Getting your symptoms checked is not wasting anyone's time. The earlier cancer is spotted, the more likely treatment is to be successful.

If you experience any symptoms of cervical cancer listed above, do not wait for your cervical check appointment. Please make an appointment with your GP.

How is cervical cancer diagnosed?

Your doctor is likely to use an instrument called a speculum to examine your cervix. A speculum holds the vagina open. Your doctor can then use a small, soft plastic brush to take a sample of cells from the cervix.

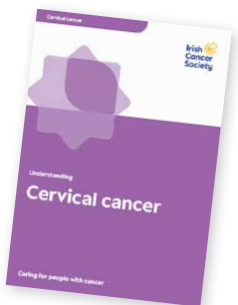
Your doctor may send you for further tests. Tests that can help to diagnose cervical cancer include:

- ▶ **Colposcopy:** A hospital specialist may examine your cervix using a colposcope. This is a large microscope with a bright light that helps them to look more closely at the surface of your cervix.

Most women who have a colposcopy don't have cancer.

- ▶ **Biopsy:** The specialist takes tissue samples from your cervix. The samples are examined under a microscope in a laboratory to see if there are abnormal changes. Depending on the type of biopsy, you may be offered painkillers or anaesthetic for your comfort.

If you are diagnosed with cervical cancer, our booklet has more information.



HPV and cervical cancer

► **What is the human papilloma virus (HPV)?**

HPV is a group of very common viruses that are spread during skin-to-skin contact, particularly sexual activity of any kind, including oral sex.

► **Around 8 out of 10 people will get HPV in their lifetime.** Usually the body's immune system finds the HPV virus and clears it up, but it can take time. This means you may never know if you had it, and you could give it to someone else.

► **Most cervical cancers are caused by certain kinds of HPV.**

► **How does HPV cause cancer?** Some types of HPV are high risk and can damage the cells of the cervix. Cervical cancer can take years to form. If you were exposed to HPV, it can take as long as 20 years since you were first exposed for normal cells to change into a precancerous condition called CIN (cervical intraepithelial neoplasia). This can turn into cancer if you don't get treatment.

► **How does the HPV vaccine help?** The HPV vaccine protects against the viruses that cause almost all cervical cancers.

The HPV vaccine is cancer prevention.

The HPV vaccine helps the immune system fight and clear the HPV infection so it can't cause cancer.

All children in first year of secondary school, regardless of their gender, are offered the HPV vaccine for free. The vaccine works best for those who have not been exposed to the virus through sexual activity.

If you didn't get the HPV vaccine in school, talk to your GP.

HPV causes most cervical cancers, and it has been strongly linked to cancers of the anus, mouth and throat, vulva, vagina and penis.

What increases my risk of cervical cancer?

► Some types of HPV

Most people will have HPV at some point in their lives. Some types of HPV can lead to changes in the cells of the cervix that can turn into cancer.

► Smoking

Nicotine can affect how your body fights HPV infection. This can result in a persistent infection in your cervix, which increases the risk of abnormal changes (called CIN) developing in your cervix.

► **Problems with immunity**

If you've had a transplant or have kidney disease and need dialysis, your body may struggle to fight HPV infection. Talk to your doctor about what steps you need to take to protect yourself.

How can I reduce my risk of cervical cancer?



Don't smoke: Not smoking makes it easier for your body to fight an HPV infection and so reduces the risk of cells in your cervix becoming cancerous.



Get the HPV vaccine: The HPV vaccine prevents the types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers and protects against cervical cancer later in life. Visit www.hpv.ie for more information.



Have regular cervical screening tests: The vaccine does not prevent all HPV, so regular cervical screening is important. Screening can help to spot any changes to cervical cells before they turn cancerous. Visit www.cervicalcheck.ie for more information.

What is cervical cancer screening?

Cervical screening is a test for people who have no symptoms. It helps to see if you might be at higher risk of developing cervical cancer.

Cervical screening involves a doctor or nurse gently putting an instrument called a speculum into your vagina to take a sample from the cervix using a special brush. The sample is checked to see if you have any of the high-risk types of HPV that cause cervical cancer.

What happens next?

- ▶ **If no HPV is found:** If the screening finds no HPV in your body, the risk of you developing cervical cancer before your next screening is very low. You should still go for another screening in the next 3 to 5 years, depending on your age.
- ▶ **If HPV is found:** If screening finds HPV, the sample of cells will be checked for abnormal changes. If you have abnormal changes, you will be referred to hospital for a colposcopy test. This test is used in screening and in diagnosis. Learn more at www.hpv.ie
 - Most people referred for a colposcopy don't need any treatment, but you will have regular screening tests until the infection clears.
 - Treatment for abnormal changes (CIN) is usually very successful at stopping cancer from developing.

CervicalCheck is the national cervical screening programme.

Women and people assigned female at birth, aged 25 to 65, should be sent regular invitations for free cervical checks. To check you're on the register, get more information or to check when your next test is due, visit the CervicalCheck website www.cervicalcheck.ie

If you have had a hysterectomy or any surgery on your cervix, vagina or uterus, check with your GP to see if you still need screening.



Contact us for more information or support

If you are worried or have questions about cervical cancer or any cancer:



**Call our Support Line on Freephone
1800 200 700.**



Email supportline@irishcancer.ie

We will provide you with confidential advice, support and information.



Ask about a call in your language.

Visit our **Daffodil Centres**, where our nurses can give you advice about how to spot cancer early and how to help prevent it. To find out where your local Daffodil Centre is, email **daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie**

Visit our website **www.cancer.ie** for more information on cervical cancer and ways you can reduce your risk of cancer.

