

Factors that Increase Your Risk for Cervical Cancer

The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is the human papilloma virus (HPV).¹ “Most cases of cervical cancer are caused by the human papillomavirus.”² Other factors, however, can increase your risk of getting cervical cancer. These factors include:

- **Tobacco use.** “Smoking cigarettes and breathing in secondhand smoke increases the risk of cervical cancer.”³ “Women who smoke are about twice as likely as non-smokers to get cervical cancer. Smoking exposes the body to many cancer-causing chemicals that affect organs other than the lungs. These harmful substances are absorbed through the lungs and carried in the bloodstream throughout the body. Tobacco by-products have been found in the cervical mucus of women who smoke. Researchers believe that these substances damage the DNA of cervix cells and may contribute to the development of cervical cancer.”¹
- **Family history of cervical cancer.** “Cervical cancer may run in some families. If your mother or sister had cervical cancer, your chances of developing the disease are 2 to 3 times higher than if no one in the family had it. Some researchers suspect that some instances of this familial tendency are caused by an inherited condition that makes some women less able to fight off HPV infection than others.”
- **Sexual history.** “Women who have had many sexual partners have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. Also, a woman who has had sex with a man who has had many sexual partners may be at higher risk of developing cervical cancer. In both cases, the risk of developing cervical cancer is higher because these women have a higher risk of HPV infection.”⁴
- **Lack of regular Pap tests.** “Cervical cancer is more common among women who don’t have regular



Pap tests. The Pap test helps doctors find abnormal cells. Removing or killing the abnormal cells usually prevents cervical cancer.”⁴

- **Poverty.** “Poverty is also a risk factor for cervical cancer. 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 cervical pre-cancers.”
- **Weakened immune system** (the body’s natural defense system). Women whose immune systems are suppressed, either by medication or medical conditions like HIV or AIDS, are at higher risk for HPV infection.⁴ A cervical pre-cancer might develop into an invasive cancer faster than it would in a person with a normal, healthy immune system.¹
- **High number of full-term pregnancies or young at first full-term pregnancy.** “Women who have had seven or more full-term pregnancies may have an increased risk of cervical cancer.”³ Women who were younger than 17 at first full-term pregnancy are also two times more likely to get cervical cancer later in life than those who were 25 years or older.¹ Reasons for these risks are not fully understood but could involve hormonal or immune system changes during pregnancy.¹
- **Long-term use of oral contraceptives.** “Women who have used oral contraceptives (“the Pill”) for five years or more have a greater risk of cervical cancer than women who have never used oral contraceptives. The risk is higher after 10 years of use.”³
- **DES.** Diethylstilbestrol (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) develop cervical cancer more often than would normally be expected; however, this occurs very rarely.¹



Sources

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