

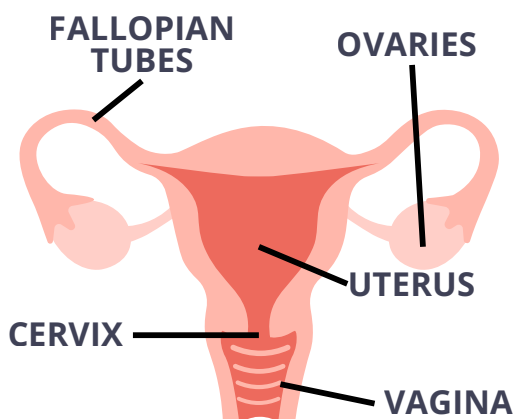
Understanding Cervical Cancer



If you or a loved one received a cervical cancer diagnosis, you may be feeling overwhelmed and have a lot of questions. You may need to consider a lot of decisions you have never thought about before. This fact sheet offers an introduction to cervical cancer and how it is treated. It provides useful information to help you learn more, plan for treatment, and find the tools you may need to cope with this disease.



To learn more about cervical cancer and other resources for support, visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Cervical-Cancer.



WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cervical cancer forms in the tissues of the cervix. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. Most cervical cancers can be found early with regular preventive screenings. These screenings often take the form of a Pap test/smear, HPV test, or self-collection (a vaginal swab you can do yourself in a private setting).

WHAT IS HPV?

The human papillomavirus (or HPV) is the name for a group of more than 100 related viruses and is very common among adults. Almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV infection. The HPV vaccine can protect against high-risk HPV types and prevent cervical cancer.

An HPV infection is passed from skin-to-skin contact with someone infected. This happens most often through vaginal, anal, or oral sex. However, infection can also occur through other forms of contact.

In most cases, the immune system can prevent HPV from causing harm, and you may not know you have the virus. A person may have HPV but never develop cervical cancer. Chronic or recurring HPV infections have a higher chance of turning into cancer if that person has other factors.

CERVICAL CANCER RISK

Risk factors are things that can increase a person's chance of developing a disease. Some cancer risk factors, such as smoking or diet, can be changed. Other risk factors, like a person's age or family history, cannot be changed. Having one or many risk factors does not mean that a person will get cancer. Some known risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- Chronic or recurring infection with HPV
- Lack of routine screenings, such as a Pap test/smear or HPV test
- Smoking
- Diet low in fruits and vegetables
- Past or current chlamydia infection
- Infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- Having multiple pregnancies or pregnancies while under the age of 17
- Long-term use of birth control pills
- If your mother took DES during pregnancy
 - Diethylstilbestrol (DES) is a hormone drug used to prevent miscarriages between 1940 and 1971.



WAYS TO REDUCE THE RISK OF DEVELOPING CERVICAL CANCER:



Cervical cancer can often be prevented with the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. Talk with your doctor to learn more about this.



Know the factors that may increase the risk of developing cervical cancer. Once you are aware of these factors, make any lifestyle changes that will improve your overall health. This could mean changing your diet or avoiding smoking. Talk about these risk factors with your family, loved ones, and healthcare team.



Attend any routine medical appointments and stay on top of recommended screenings. Having a complete pelvic exam does not always mean that a Pap smear with HPV testing was performed. A Pap smear and HPV testing specifically looks for abnormal cells on your cervix that may become cancer in the future. Be sure to ask your healthcare team at what age you should start and how often you should get them done. Early diagnosis helps. The earlier a person is diagnosed, the more options will be available for treatment and overall cancer care.

To learn more about screening and prevention, visit
www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Screening-Prevention

DIAGNOSING CERVICAL CANCER

If your doctor suspects cervical cancer, they will want to perform additional tests. This will help them learn as much as possible about your type of cancer, where it started, and where, if anywhere, it has spread.

A complete cancer diagnosis often takes more than one appointment and may include:

Colposcopy – Your doctor will look at your cervix with a colposcope. This tool has a bright light and magnifying lens. They will apply medicine to your cervix that highlights abnormal cells, and your doctor may recommend taking a biopsy (small tissue sample).

Biopsy – A tissue sample is removed from the cervix and looked at under a microscope. Your doctor will look for precancer (dysplasia) or cancer cells.

Imaging – Your doctor may order tests, such as a CT, MRI, or PET scan, to determine whether cancer has spread to other parts of your body.

To learn more about diagnosing cervical cancer, visit
www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Cervical-Cancer.



UNDERSTANDING CERVICAL CANCER STAGING

Staging is a key part of diagnosis. If cancer is found, your doctor will need to know the stage, or extent of the disease, to determine the best treatment. Staging is used to find out whether the cancer has spread, and if so, to which parts of the body. Doctors use the information they gather from your tests, biopsies, and scans to get a full picture of the cancer.

Cervical cancer is diagnosed in stages from 1 through 4 (I – IV):

Stage 1 (I) is the earliest stage.

During this stage, cancer cells are only found in the cervix.

1

Stage 2 (II) cancer cells are found in the upper part of the vagina.

Cancer cells may also be in nearby tissue close to the pelvic wall.

2

Stage 3 (III) cancer cells are found in the lower part of the vagina.

Cancer may have also started to spread into the pelvic wall.

3

Stage 4 (IV) is also called advanced or metastatic cancer. Cancer has spread to other parts of the body. This may include the bladder or rectum.

4

CANCER SUPPORT HELPLINE®

If you need help finding resources or want help getting information about your cancer, call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline® at 888-793-9355. It is staffed by community navigators and resource specialists who can assist you Monday – Thursday 11:00 a.m.- 8:00 p.m. ET and Friday 11:00 a.m.- 6:00 p.m. ET.



GET TO KNOW THE CANCER CARE TEAM

Cancer treatment can be complicated. It is always changing as new discoveries are made. You deserve a healthcare team you can trust to take the best care of you. It is important to find providers who specialize in treating your type of cancer. The professionals who will work together on your team may include:

Primary care provider – Understands your medical history, preferences, and how you would like to manage your general health throughout your treatment and beyond. Your primary care provider may help coordinate with the team that will help you manage treatment decisions along the way.

Gynecologic or medical oncologist – Treats cancer with systemic (or whole-body) treatments using medications. Some examples are immunotherapy, chemotherapy, and targeted therapy. A special type of medical oncologist is a gynecologic oncologist. This person may also be part of your care and may recommend surgery, such as a hysterectomy.

Radiation oncologist – Treats cancer using radiation therapy. This can help with pain or kill the cancer cells.

Nurse practitioner (NP), physician assistant (PA), or nurse (RN) – Works alongside your oncologist to provide care. At times, you may speak more with this type of healthcare provider than your oncologist.

Oncology pharmacist – Is an expert on medicines used to treat cancer. They can educate you on any side effects and how to manage them. They can also help you understand how to best take different medications if you have multiple at once.

Registered dietitian (RD) - Is trained to recommend foods and other ways to make sure your body gets the nutrients it needs. Make sure to find an RD who specializes in cancer nutrition.

Social worker - Is trained to help you and your caregiver with your emotional and logistical needs. They can help navigate appointments and find other support resources.

Financial navigator - Helps you and your loved ones understand the cost of different treatments. They can explain how your insurance plan may help cover any costs. They may also help find financial assistance programs or payment plans to ease any financial burden.

GETTING A SECOND OPINION

Getting a second opinion allows you to learn about all possible treatment options available. You can get a second opinion at any point in your care. Many people seek a second opinion — or even a third. Many health insurances offer coverage options for a second opinion. Speak with your healthcare insurance or a financial navigator about your options.

If you feel that your doctor is not addressing your needs or concerns, consider another care facility. Another care center or doctor may help you better understand your cancer and how to treat it. They may be closer to your home, have more support services, or have a connection to clinical trials.

Do not worry about hurt feelings. It is important that you feel comfortable with your treatment team. You can always return to your first doctor if you want. But remember, timely cancer treatment is key when deciding to seek multiple opinions.





TREATMENT PLANNING

Throughout the cancer experience, your voice and wishes are very important throughout the decision-making process. You might help choose the type of treatment, the timing of treatment, or the order of treatments. You may have the option to join a clinical trial. Making these choices is called “treatment planning.”

As you are making treatment decisions, think about what is important to you and any personal goals you may have. Let your care team know of any important family responsibilities or lifestyle values.

Talk with them about your needs and preferences. Ask about the goals of the treatment. Also ask how each treatment might affect your personal goals. Make sure you understand why one treatment might work better for you than another.

For more information about making treatment decisions, visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Treatment-Decision-Process.

OPEN TO OPTIONS®

If you are facing a cancer treatment decision, the Cancer Support Community’s Open to Options® program can help you prepare a list of personalized questions to share with your doctor. Our Open to Options® specialists can help you create a written list of specific questions about your treatment plan for your doctor. Call 888-793-9355 to schedule an appointment or to find a Cancer Support Community near you.

TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR CERVICAL CANCER

Treatment for cervical cancer will depend on different factors. This includes:

- The type and stage of your cancer
- The location of your cancer
- Your overall health
- Your preferences and personal goals, including future fertility

Be sure to share your preferences and work with your healthcare team to find the best treatment for you. You know your body and your needs the best.



Some of the most common methods to treat cervical cancer include:

Surgery: A surgeon removes any nearby tissues in the body that have cancer cells. Surgery is often used to treat Stage I cervical cancer. Surgery usually involves a hysterectomy (removal of the uterus).

Radiation therapy: Uses high-energy rays to kill or damage cancer cells. Radiation is typically used in patients where surgery is not an option, or in patients after surgery who are at high risk for cancer recurrence (when cancer comes back) who have undergone surgery.

Chemotherapy: Also known as chemo. This treatment uses drugs to destroy or damage fast-growing cells, like cancer cells. Chemotherapy for cervical cancer is usually given through a vein. It is sometimes combined with radiation therapy.

Targeted therapy: Uses drugs to target specific changes in cancer cells that help them grow, divide, and spread. This treatment is more precise. It fights cancer cells while causing less harm to other cells in the body. There are different types of targeted therapies to treat cervical cancer.

Immunotherapy: Works with the body's immune system to find, attack, and kill cancer cells. These drugs can work in different ways. Some boost the immune system, so it can fight cancer better. Other drugs help the immune system better recognize cancer cells.

To learn more about these treatment options, visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Cervical-Cancer.

WHAT ARE CLINICAL TRIALS?

Consider talking to your healthcare team about clinical trials. Clinical trials are research studies. They help us learn new and better ways to treat cancer. Clinical trials may aim to improve a current treatment or test a new one. Clinical trials may be an option at any point during your care. A clinical trial may be the only way to gain access to a promising new treatment option.

For more information about clinical trials, visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Clinical-Trials.

MANAGING TREATMENT SIDE EFFECTS

It helps to learn about the side effects of treatment before you begin, so you will know what to expect. You may experience side effects at different times. Be sure to ask about side effects that you may experience during or immediately after treatment, as well as long-term side effects. When you know more, you can work with your healthcare team to manage your quality of life during and after treatment.

Below are side effects that may appear when you are being treated for cervical cancer:

- **Nausea**
- **Diarrhea**
- **Constipation**
- **Fatigue (feeling very tired)**
- **Change in appetite or taste**
- **Brain fog (difficulty with remembering things)**
- **Mouth sores**
- **General pain or soreness**
- **Blood clots**
- **Changes in your blood work (low white blood cells, anemia)**
- **Dehydration**
- **Menopause symptoms, such as hot flashes or migraines**
- **Intimacy problems or changes in sexual desire**
- **Mood changes**
- **Lymphedema (swelling)**
- **Weight changes**



It is important to let your healthcare team know right away if you notice any side effects or changes during treatment.

Your healthcare team can help you monitor and manage any side effects. They can give you medications and strategies to reduce discomfort. Seeing a palliative care specialist can also help.

Visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Cancer-Treatment-Side-Effects for more information on managing treatment side effects.

PALLIATIVE CARE

Palliative care is a type of support that helps you feel better during or after cancer treatment. It focuses on relieving symptoms, like pain or fatigue. A palliative care specialist can help you manage any side effects and feel more comfortable.

Palliative care is different from hospice care. It is available at any point in your cancer experience. It can be available as early as the time of diagnosis. Palliative care is available for people with any stage of cancer. You can receive it at the same time as your cancer treatment. The goal of palliative care is to help you live as well as possible throughout your cancer experience.



SURVIVORSHIP & RECURRENCE

Many people who complete their treatment for cancer often fear that it will return (cancer recurrence). After treatment, ask your doctor or oncology nurse for a “survivorship care plan” specific to you. This plan will list out what follow-up care you will need over time. It will include any next steps for you and your care team to monitor your cancer.

COPING WITH CERVICAL CANCER

Life after cancer treatment may require more physical and emotional energy. It can also require more time and money. You may not be able to do all the things you used to do right away. How you feel about your body may change. In addition, some people in your life may respond in ways you dislike when they learn about your cancer and treatment decisions. Concerns about how others may respond can lead to another layer of stress.

It is important to take care of yourself, as you navigate life after a cervical cancer diagnosis. This may mean putting your needs above other people’s. It may also mean advocating for yourself — when you are uncomfortable or in pain or feeling worried — to get the support you need.



NAVIGATING STIGMA

Many people living with cervical cancer feel that they must explain the cause of their condition to others. You may feel that you are unfairly “judged” because of the perceived links between cervical cancer and sex or promiscuous behavior. The feeling that society has these thoughts about you, even when they go unsaid, is called “stigma.” It is unfortunate that these ideas are often based on stereotypes.

Dealing with a cancer diagnosis and treatment is already difficult to manage. The added feelings of stigma, shame, and blame do not help. It is not your fault. It does not matter how you got cervical cancer. You deserve the best care.

Here are some tips to find support after your diagnosis:

- Take steps to get the care and information you need.
- Take advantage of clinical trials or new developments in cancer treatment.
- Focus on what is in your control.
- Surround yourself with people you trust and who support you.
- Talk about your experience with a therapist, social worker, spiritual leader, or support group.

Remember, you cannot change people’s thoughts, but you can change your own. You can change your experience and surround yourself with a supportive network.

A woman with dark hair in braids, wearing a grey turtleneck sweater, is sitting on a bed with white pillows. She has a thoughtful and slightly distressed expression, looking off to the side. Her hands are clasped in her lap.

CSC and Gilda’s Club centers provide services free of charge to people impacted by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more at a location near you. Call 888-793-9355 or visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Find-Location-Near-You.



MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Managing both the emotional and physical impact of cancer can lead to a lot of stress. You may experience feelings of anxiety, depression, or overall distress. After treatment is complete, you may fear that the cancer will return.

It is important to let your care team know about any mental or physical changes you experience. They may recommend medication and other resources to support your mental health.

Here are some other ways to take care of your mental health:

- Be aware of your feelings and how you manage them during this time.
- Participate in activities that help you relax. Some examples include deep breathing, yoga, or other creative activities.
- Take time to think about your life goals and self-image. Explore what is important to you and what makes you feel happy.
- Focus your energy on things that improve your overall well-being and provide happiness.
- Talk to a mental health specialist or social worker. This is especially important if you find that certain emotions last for a long time or start to impact your daily life. These experts can help you manage these feelings to find a sense of calm.

To learn more about coping with mental health and cancer, visit www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Coping-Mental-Health-Concerns.



INTIMACY & SEXUAL HEALTH

How you feel about and perceive your body can impact your feelings around sex and intimacy. Changes to perceived body image can make intimacy tricky for all involved. The first step to intimacy during and after any treatment is patience and understanding. Your sexual health and intimacy may look different than before your diagnosis. You are not alone in seeking other ways to maintain intimacy. Talk openly and honestly with your partner about intimacy and how you are feeling.

Talking with your doctor may help support this aspect of your life. If you undergo surgery, talk to your care team about being intimate after the procedure. Ask them about recovery time and when you may be able to engage in certain activities. Bring up any aspects affecting your sexual health. Let your doctor know if you experience any pain or discomfort. Your care team may be able to help you understand what the cause is and give advice to help reduce the symptoms. They likely have options for you to try that can give some relief or benefit.

It may also be helpful to talk with other cervical cancer survivors. Having support and guidance from people going through similar experiences can help you navigate these new challenges.

Your partner should allow time for you to mourn any physical loss and changes to your body image, prepare yourself, find confidence in your body, and communicate when ready. Openness and trust can ensure a healthy, comfortable, safe, and intimate connection. Your partner should be supportive of your changing body image. They should offer acceptance and encouragement as you make the transition from a pre-cancer to a post-cancer body.

SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVERS

Caregivers play such an important role in the cancer experience. They provide important physical, emotional, and logistical support. While this role can be rewarding, the responsibilities can often be stressful and take up a great deal of time. It is important that your caregiver(s) feel supported every step of the way.

As your caregiver navigates the cancer experience, remember:

- Your healthcare team can provide resources. They can connect your caregiver(s) to other forms of support to help manage their duties.
- It is important for your caregiver(s) to keep up with their own health needs. Setting time to care for themselves will greatly benefit you as well.
- Caregivers can connect with others and exchange ideas on CSC's Caregiver Support discussion forum. Visit www.MyLifeLine.org.

For more information and resources to support your caregiver(s), call 888-793-9355 or visit <https://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers>.



Life may feel very different after a cervical cancer diagnosis for everyone impacted. You may experience physical, emotional, and social changes which may now require additional help. Your needs may change over time, and that is OK. Having support during and after cancer treatment can make a big difference.

Seek support from your care team, family, friends, and others you trust when you feel overwhelmed. Feel empowered to seek the help that you or your loved ones need. At the end of this resource, you will find a list of trusted organizations that can help. Cancer Support Community and many other organizations have helplines, support groups, online discussion boards, and more ways to seek support from others who have cancer.



RESOURCES

CERVICAL CANCER RESOURCES

Cancer Support Community

888-793-9355 · www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Cervical-Cancer

Cervivor, Inc.

www.Cervivor.org

American Cancer Society

800-227-2345 · www.Cancer.org/Cancer/Risk-Prevention/HPV/HPV-Vaccine.html

Foundation for Women's Cancer

www.FoundationForWomensCancer.org

SHARE Cancer Support

844-275-7427 · www.ShareCancerSupport.org

National Cancer Institute (NCI)

800-422-6237 · www.Cancer.gov/Types/Cervical

NCI's Clinical Trials Registry

800-422-6237 · www.Cancer.gov/ClinicalTrials



Cancer Support Community Resources

Cancer Support Helpline® — Have questions, concerns or looking for resources? Call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline (888-793-9355), available in 200 languages Mon-Thurs 11am-8pm ET and Fri 11am-6pm ET.

Open to Options® — Preparing for your next appointment? Our trained specialists can help you create a list of questions to share with your doctor. Make an appointment by calling 888-793-9355 or by contacting your local CSC or Gilda's Club.

Frankly Speaking About Cancer® — Trusted information for cancer patients and their loved ones is available through publications, online, and in-person programs.

Services at Local CSCs and Gilda's Clubs — With the help of over 200 locations, in 50 markets, CSC and Gilda's Club centers provide services free of charge to people impacted by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more
www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/FindLocation.

Cancer Experience Registry® — Help others by sharing your cancer patient or cancer caregiver experience via survey at **www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org**

MyLifeLine® — CSC's secure, online community welcomes anyone impacted by cancer to easily connect with community to reduce stress, anxiety, and isolation. Create a personal network site and invite friends & family to follow your journey. And participate in our discussion forums any time of day to meet others like you who understand what you are experiencing. Join now at **www.MyLifeLine.org**.

Grassroots Network — Make sure your voice is heard by federal and state policy makers on issues affecting cancer patients and survivors by joining our Network at **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate**.

This publication is available to download and print yourself at **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Cervical-Cancer**.

For print copies of this publication or other information about coping with cancer, visit **Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org**.

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