

Cervical cancer



Matepukupuku o te waha whare tangata

Aotearoa New Zealand has one of the best screening programmes in the world to help find cervical cancer early.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer of the cervix, which sits at the lower part of the uterus (womb) in the female reproductive system.

Like the rest of your body, the cervix is made up of tiny 'building blocks' called cells.

Cervical cancer begins when these cells grow abnormally.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a disease of the body's cells. It starts in our genes. Our bodies are constantly making new cells, a process controlled by certain genes. Cancers are caused by damage to these genes. As the damaged cells replicate a lump or tumour is formed.

Tumours can be:

- Benign - not cancerous. These do not spread to other parts of the body.
- Malignant - cancerous

Types of cervical cancer

There are two main types of cervical cancer:

- squamous cell carcinoma - starts in the skin-like cells that cover the cervix's outer surface at the top of the vagina.
- adenocarcinoma - starts in the glandular cells in the cervical canal.

Learn more about the cervix

The cervix is at the lower part of the uterus (womb), which extends into the vagina. The cervix is sometimes called the neck of the uterus.

There is a small opening in the cervix, the cervical canal, which leads through the cervix into the main part of the uterus.

The cervix produces some of the moistness that helps lubricate the vagina. It also makes the mucus that helps sperm travel up to the fallopian tubes to fertilise an egg from the ovary.

The cervix holds the baby in the uterus during pregnancy. During labour, the cervix opens to allow the baby to be born.

Cervical cancer symptoms

Signs and symptoms of cervical cancer may include:

- vaginal bleeding between periods or after menopause
- vaginal bleeding after sex
- pain during sex
- vaginal discharge that's not normal for you
- feeling tired and weak (fatigue)
- pain or swelling in your legs
- lower back pain

Often there are no signs of early-stage cervical cancer, which is why doctors encourage regular cervical smear tests.

Having these symptoms does not mean you have cervical cancer, but it is important to have any changes checked by your doctor.

Tips for talking to your doctor

- make a list of what you are feeling and how often it happens, including as much detail as possible
- think about your family/whānau history of cancer and tell your doctor
- go back to your doctor if you don't feel better, even if tests show you don't have a problem - you can ask for a second opinion if you want one
- take a family/whānau member or friend with you to the appointment for support

National Cervical Screening Programme

Aotearoa New Zealand has a national cervical screening programme for 25 to 69-year-olds.

Is it your time to screen?

Time to Screen (<https://www.timetoscreen.nz/cervical-screening/>)

What causes cervical cancer?

Almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV).

Other risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- not having regular cervical smear tests
- tobacco use
- if you are on contraception (the pill) and also have an HPV infection
- If your mother was given a synthetic hormone (stilbestrol) during pregnancy, used from 1940 to the 1970s. If so, you may need annual check-ups.

Learn more about human papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus spread through skin contact, often during sex, which causes cell changes. Many sexually active people will have HPV at some time during their life.

Your immune system is normally able to fight an HPV infection, and usually, infections come and go without causing any problems.

In some people, the virus can lie dormant for many months or even years before causing cell changes. These cell changes may develop into cancer.

The HPV vaccine is free for people aged between 9-26 years under the National Immunisation Schedule.

If you missed out on getting the vaccine at primary school, talk to your doctor. The vaccine may still be right for you. It will prevent new HPV infections.