



Cervical Cancer Screening: What Women Living With HIV Need to Know

Women living with HIV are at higher risk for long-lasting HPV infection and cervical cancer.

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Summary:

Cervical cancer screening is an important part of routine preventive care. This blog post shares ways women living with HIV can take proactive steps to protect their health, understand screening guidelines, and stay engaged in routine care.

Cervical cancer is a disease in which cells in the cervix grow out of control. At the heart of most cervical cancer cases is a common virus called HPV (human papillomavirus)—a sexually transmitted infection thought to be responsible for virtually all cervical cancer. Over time, HPV can cause normal cells to turn into abnormal cells, which can later turn into cancer. [Most people who have HPV do not know it](#), but it is estimated that by age 50, at least four out of every five women will have HPV at some point in their life. It is estimated that nearly all cervical cancers can be prevented with timely HPV vaccination.

Cervical cancer screening tests look for abnormal cells, even before symptoms develop, and allow people to get treatment that prevents cervical cancer.

Cervical Cancer Screening Saves Lives

Regular screening allows for earlier detection and treatment, which may slow or even stop the cancer from progressing. There are two screening tests used to prevent cervical cancer or to find it early. The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for abnormal cells on the cervix that could become cervical cancer if not properly treated. The HPV test looks for the virus that can lead to cervical cancer.

For most people, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends:

- For women ages 21 to 29, getting a Pap test every 3 years.
- For women ages 30 to 65, getting either a Pap test every 3 years, an HPV test every 5 years, or

both every 5 years.

But for women living with HIV, the screening guidelines are different.

Screening Guidelines for Women Living With HIV

Women living with HIV are at higher risk for long-lasting HPV infection and cervical cancer. Because of this increased risk, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines recommend that once a person who is over 21 years old is diagnosed with HIV, they should undergo annual cervical cancer screening, which can include an HPV test and a Pap smear to check for signs of precancer and cancer. You may also need to continue screenings after age 65.

If you're living with HIV, it's important to talk with your health care provider about the right screening schedule for you.

Take Charge of your Cervical Health

Now is a great time to take charge of your health. If you haven't had a cervical cancer screening in a while—or aren't sure when you're due—schedule a check-up and ask about it.

Your care team is there to support you. Cervical cancer is one of the few cancers that is both preventable and detectable early. Staying on top of your screenings is a powerful step toward protecting your health.

To learn more about how HIV affects women's health, visit [HIV.gov](https://www.hiv.gov) and explore the "[HIV and Women's Health Issues](#)" page for trusted information.

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