

MYTHS

vs

FACTS

about cervical cancer

I don't need to get screened because cervical cancer doesn't run in my family

Cervical cancer is not a familial disease. Cervical cancer is caused by long-standing infection with one or more high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV infection can be transmitted by sexual contact of any nature (including hand-to-genital contact). HPV is a very common infection among men and women. Lack of a family history of cervical cancer is not a reason to avoid getting screened.

I don't need to get screened because I don't have any symptoms

Cervical cancer in its early stages does not have any symptoms. In fact, it may be detected at a precancerous stage, when treatment is very simple and highly effective. Hence, simple screening tests are done in healthy people without any symptoms, to identify any precancer of the cervix. Women should not wait for symptoms to arise to get screened, because the precancer can progress to cancer and require surgery or radiotherapy and other treatments. If a woman has any unexplained vaginal bleeding, or long-term vaginal discharge, she must consult her health-care provider immediately to find its cause. Cervical cancer can be treated if it is detected at an early stage.

A cancer check-up is done only if a woman has symptoms

I do not want to get screened, because if I have cervical cancer it cannot be treated

Screening helps to identify any precancers in the cervix. When precancers are treated promptly, this can prevent cervical cancer in the future. Women who avoid getting screened periodically usually miss the opportunity of detection of any abnormality at an early stage, when treatment is most effective. Once cervical cancer develops, the treatment is long and expensive and sometimes may not be completely effective over time. Hence, there is nothing to fear from screening. Prevention is better than cure, and screening with prompt treatment (when required) will help save your life.

Cervical cancer has no cure

If I am found to have cervical cancer, I will die, so I don't want to know it

Once you have cervical cancer, it will keep coming back until you die

Screening helps to identify early precancerous lesions, which can be treated easily with simple procedures. Regular follow-ups after the treatment will ensure the identification of cervical health, which will prevent the development of cervical cancer. It takes several years for an untreated precancerous lesion to develop into invasive cancer. Hence, before the progression to cancer, there are several opportunities for a woman to get screened periodically and receive prompt treatment when required.

Having precancerous cells means that you have cervical cancer





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HPV infection is not common, and it only affects people who have multiple partners, so I should not worry about the disease or screening test for myself

HPV is a very common infection among men and women. Generally, the infection clears spontaneously. Only in a few cases, it may remain persistent and can cause cervical precancers. If cervical precancers are not detected and treated appropriately, they can progress to cervical cancer. Screening helps to identify these abnormalities in a woman at an early stage. The HPV vaccine, when given to adolescent girls before their sexual debut, will protect them in later life from cervical cancer.

If a woman has cervical cancer, people think she is a prostitute

- Having sex with multiple partners increases the chance of getting infected with HPV. However, women and men in a stable marriage can also have HPV infection.

Having sex with another woman's husband can cause cervical cancer

- Immunocompromised individuals (e.g. people living with HIV, organ transplant recipients) have an increased risk of getting infected with HPV, having persistent HPV infection, having cervical abnormalities, and developing cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is contagious

- Cervical cancer is not contagious. It is caused by long-standing HPV infection, which is common among men and women. This does not mean that someone coming into close contact with a patient with cervical cancer will develop cervical cancer. In fact, no cancer type is contagious.

Only promiscuous women can get cervical cancer

- Cervical cancer is not a transmissible disease. It is the HPV infection that can be transmitted from one person to another as a sexually transmitted disease. The persistence of the disease leads to abnormalities in the cervix, which if not identified and treated promptly may progress to cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is transmitted by promiscuous men and women

Women who have an early sexual debut get cervical cancer

If HPV infection is acquired during the sexual debut at a younger age and it is not cleared by the body's immune system, it can become persistent and increase the risk of cervical abnormalities. Hence, periodic screening at the recommended age must be done to identify any abnormality early and treat it promptly to prevent cervical cancer.

Only women who have had multiple births get cervical cancer

There is no direct evidence of women with multiple births having a higher risk of cervical cancer.

HPV vaccination means you do not need screening at a later stage

HPV vaccination at the recommended age during adolescence can prevent cervical cancer. However, the vaccine protects only against the most common types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer. Some women may develop cervical cancer caused by infections with the HPV types that are not targeted by the vaccine. Hence, it is better for women in the recommended age group to get screened. If the test results show any abnormality, appropriate management can be done.





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HPV infection always gets cleared from the body on its own

In the majority of cases, HPV infection gets cleared from the body on its own without the person even knowing that they had it. However, in some cases the infection can persist and can lead to serious health problems, such as genital warts, cervical abnormalities, cervical cancer, and some other HPV-associated cancers of the genitalia and of the oropharynx.

Cervical cancer is hereditary. Some people think it is a family disease

Cervical cancer is not hereditary and does not run in families like breast cancer and ovarian cancer. It is caused by long-standing HPV infection. To avoid getting the disease, the woman must get herself screened for cervical cancer. To prevent your adolescent children from getting the infection, get them vaccinated with the HPV vaccine before their sexual debut.

The cause of cervical cancer is not known, so there is no need to get screened

- The cause of cervical cancer is known. It is caused by long-standing infection of the cervix (the lowermost part of the uterus) with one or more high-risk HPV types. Screening helps to identify the early changes in the cervix caused by the HPV infection and treat any abnormalities, so that cervical cancer can be prevented.
- Cervical cancer can be prevented. HPV vaccination is for adolescents, before the sexual debut, and in women aged 30–49 years, screening for cervical cancer is the evidence-based best practice to identify any precancerous lesion early and treat it promptly, to prevent cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer cannot be prevented

If you have HPV, you will develop cervical cancer

Although HPV infection is very common, the body's immune system usually clears the infection within 1–2 years. More than 80% of women clear this infection. However, in some cases it does not clear and causes abnormal cell changes in the cervix. These changes do not cause any symptoms, and only screening can help to identify women at risk of cervical precancer or cervical cancer.

If you test positive for HPV, you will definitely get cervical cancer

Cervical cancer occurs due to Satanic curse

Cervical cancer is a disease that develops slowly over time and is caused by long-standing infection of the cervix with one or more high-risk HPV types. HPV infection is very common among sexually active men and women. It has nothing to do with occult practices or beliefs. Screening for the disease, even in a healthy woman, can help to identify the early changes in the cervix, which if not treated promptly can gradually progress to cancer.

When a woman has cervical cancer, people think she is bewitched, so I don't want to know if I have it



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The instruments used for screening tests are very painful

Screening enlarges the vagina and reduces sexual pleasure for men and women

Screening makes your vagina bigger and loose

Screening causes other infections, leading to cervical cancer

Once you have been treated for cervical cancer, you can no longer have sex

The vagina closes up after radiation treatment

After screening there is lot of watery discharge, which causes weakness

I have not had a sexual partner for several years, so I do not have a risk of cervical cancer

Currently I am not sexually active, so I have no risk of cervical cancer

Some women may experience slight discomfort during the screening procedure, but it is not painful. The instruments used are the same as those used for any routine gynaecological examination. They do not cause pain, and they do not stretch the vagina permanently. The vagina returns to its pre-examination or pre-screening state as soon as the instrument (the speculum) is removed.

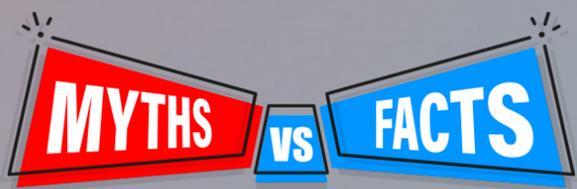
All recommended infection prevention practices are adopted during screening and treatment, to prevent any infection. Screening helps to identify and treat any precancerous lesions early, which is life-saving for the woman.

After treatment of cervical precancerous lesions, it is better to avoid sex for at least 4 weeks, to allow new tissue to develop and heal the treated cervix. During this time there is also some increased vaginal discharge. Hence, having sex soon after the treatment may increase the risk of infection in the cervical wound. If there is no bleeding or fever and the woman is comfortable, she may have sex gently and with the partner using condoms in the few weeks after treatment, although it is better to avoid sex. The couple can resume sex after 4 weeks. After major surgery or radiation therapy due to cervical cancer, it is best to follow the advice of the treating physician.

Radiation is an advanced mode of treatment for invasive cervical cancer. It requires multiple visits to a cancer centre, and the treatment takes more than a month to complete. Hence, it is better to get screened periodically at the recommended age for early detection and simple, life-saving outpatient treatment. However, radiation treatment is also safe. It can cure many patients. The vagina does not close up, and women can resume sex with precautions.

This is not true. After screening, you may have mild discharge for a day or two, which subsides spontaneously. Screening or treatment of cervical precancers does not cause any short-term or long-term weakness in the woman. All cervical cancer screening tests are safe and are performed with infection prevention practices.

This is not correct. If you have been sexually active even once, at any time of your life, you should get screened, even if you are not currently sexually active.



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I have undergone the family planning operation, so I do not need to have cervical cancer screening

The family planning operation (tubal ligation) will prevent you from having more pregnancies and births. Cervical cancer screening will help to identify any abnormal changes in the cervix, and if these changes are identified and treated, cervical cancer can be prevented. Preventing pregnancy and preventing cervical cancer are two totally separate things. Even if you have had a tubal ligation, you still need to get screened for cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is only found in elderly women

Even if you are menopausal or elderly, if you are within the age range recommended by the screening programme, you need to get screened. The purpose of screening is to detect the precancers that occur many years before a cancer diagnosis. In older women (aged 60 years or older), screening of cervical cancer is difficult because the cervix shrinks and becomes flush with the vagina. It may be better to consult your health-care provider about the need for screening. However, if you have any vaginal bleeding or foul-smelling pus-like vaginal discharge, consult your health-care provider immediately.

I am 65. Can I go for screening?

I am menopausal and I have not had periods for several years, so I do not need a screening test

Some cervical infections can be treated with medicines, but the early changes in the cervix due to HPV infection cannot be treated with any oral or local medication. Cervical abnormalities can be effectively treated with the simple procedures of cryotherapy or thermal ablation, or removing the abnormal cervical tissue. Even cervical cancer cannot be treated with medicines alone. It will require other, more long-term treatment with medicines and radiological or surgical treatments, depending on the stage.

Cervical abnormalities can be treated with medicines

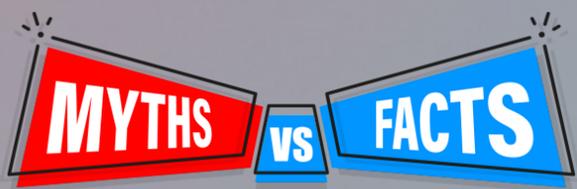
A positive screening test result does not necessarily mean that you have cancer. There are different stages in the development of cervical cancer from the early abnormalities of the cervix. It takes several years for cancer to develop. Hence, screening is an important, life-saving simple procedure to identify women at risk of having cervical abnormalities. If you have a negative screening test result, then it indicates that your cervix is currently healthy; however, you will still need to get screened regularly as advised by your health-care provider.

My cervical cancer screening test result is positive. Does this mean that I have cancer?

No. A positive screening test result will require simple diagnostic procedures or treatment. These are local treatments at the level of the cervix. They are painless and do not require any anaesthesia. Your uterus will remain intact.

If my screening test result is positive, will I have to get the uterus removal operation done?





about cervical cancer

Cervical cancer screening is recommended only for women in the low- and middle-income strata

Cervical cancer screening is needed for all women irrespective of their educational or economic status.

Cervical cancer screening is needed only when the cervix looks unhealthy

A cervix that may look healthy can have abnormalities. These abnormalities can be detected only through screening and diagnostic follow-up. Screening is needed even when the cervix looks healthy.

Only HIV-positive women can get cervical cancer

Cervical cancer can occur in any woman who has persistent HPV infection. In a woman living with HIV, the immune system is compromised, and this leads to an increased risk of long-standing HPV infection, cervical abnormalities, and cervical cancer.

A woman whose husband has prostate cancer will have cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is a disease that occurs due to persistent infection with some HPV types. Screening helps to detect any cervical abnormality in a woman early, which can be easily treated as an outpatient procedure. If a woman's husband or partner has prostate cancer, this does not increase the risk of cervical cancer in the woman.

Atlas of

VISUAL INSPECTION OF THE CERVIX WITH ACETIC ACID

for screening, triage, and assessment for treatment

