

# CERVICAL CANCER Frequently Asked Questions

With cervical cancer being one of the most common cancers diagnosed in women in SA, even though it's the easiest female cancer to prevent with the HPV vaccine and regular Pap smears, the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) shares the most frequently asked questions.



## Q WHAT CAUSES CERVICAL CANCER?

**A** Almost all cervical cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. There are many types of HPV; some types can cause changes on your cervix that can lead to cervical cancer over time, while other types can cause genital or skin warts.

HPV is so common that most people get it at some time in their lives. HPV usually causes no symptoms so you can't tell that you have it. For most people, HPV will go away on its own; however, if it doesn't, there is a chance that over time it may cause cervical cancer.

## Q WHO IS AT RISK?

**A** Those who are tobacco smokers; have HIV, or any other autoimmune condition or immune compromising health problem that makes it difficult for the body to fight infection. Studies provide evidence that women who have given birth to three or more children are also at risk. Several factors related to your sexual history can increase your risk: becoming sexually active before the age of 18; having many sexual partners, including having one partner who may be at high risk (someone with HPV infection or many sexual partners).

## Q WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

**A** Early on, cervical cancer may not cause signs and symptoms. Advanced cervical cancer may cause bleeding or discharge from the vagina that isn't normal for you, such as bleeding after sex. If you have any of these signs, see your doctor. They may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to have it checked out.

## Q HOW IS CERVICAL CANCER DIAGNOSED?

**A** There are three screening tests that can help in the detection of cervical cancer before it develops. The Pap smear is the most commonly used screening test. This test looks for pre-cancers or cell changes on the cervix that can be treated.

The HPV test looks for HPV, the virus that can cause precancerous cell changes and cervical cancer. This test identifies women at high risk who may need to be treated to prevent cervical cancer.

The visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) inspects the cervix, using acetic acid (distilled vinegar) to identify abnormal changes on the cervix and that can be treated to prevent cervical cancer.

If there are any abnormal cells present then the doctor may choose to observe these cells with regular screening tests or the doctor may decide to biopsy the abnormal cells to further check whether or not it's cancerous cells.

If the biopsy results come back as the abnormal cells being cancerous then a doctor will alert you of your diagnosis and further discuss possible treatment plans that best suite you.

## Q WHAT CAN I DO TO PREVENT CERVICAL CANCER?

**A** There are a few simple preventive measures that can be carried out by women. For instance, women should be vigilant about getting regular Pap smear tests and to know their results so as to ensure that they follow-up on abnormal Pap smears.

Women should avoid smoking, even second-hand smoking is dangerous and harmful. Use condoms during sex so as to avoid the possibility of contracting HPV as well as limit the number of sexual partners and finally all women should ensure that they get the HPV vaccine.

## Q WHAT SUPPORT CAN I RECEIVE?

**A** CANSA offers psycho-social support to patients, caregivers and loved ones through its free CANSA Tele Counselling service (available in seven languages) and support groups (including WhatsApp and Facebook support groups). Contact CANSA Help Desk, toll-free on 0800 226622. Trained counsellors will support those in need.



The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA) enables research in lowering cancer risk, educates about cancer symptoms, screening and risk reduction as well as provides care and support to all affected by cancer.  
Toll Free 0800 22 66 22 | [www.cansa.org.za](http://www.cansa.org.za)

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