



Cervical Cancer and Screening

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cancer is a disease where abnormal cells grow without control and can invade other tissues. There are many different types of cancer, which are named after the part of the body where the cancer starts in. Cervical cancer refers to cancer of the cervix.

The cervix is located at the top of the vagina and is the opening to the uterus. The cervix is made up of cells. In many women, cells of the cervix can change from healthy to unhealthy. Typically, the unhealthy cells change back to healthy cells on their own. However, in some cases the cells of the cervix remain unhealthy, which can increase a woman's risk of cervical cancer.

Before cervical cancer develops, the cells of the cervix start to change and become abnormal. These abnormal changes are precancerous, which means they are not cancer, but could become cancerous.

How Do You Get It?

There is no single cause of cervical cancer, but certain factors appear to increase the risk of developing it. The main risk factor for developing cervical

cancer is infection of the cervix with Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)¹. (For more information on HPV infection see NAHO's fact sheet entitled What is HPV?)

Other risk factors include:

- Not getting regular Pap tests.
- Multiple sexual partners.
- Young age at first intercourse.
- Tobacco use.
- Having many children.
- Human Immunodeficiency Virus infection (HIV).
- Increased age.²

Screening - What is a Pap test?

A Pap test is a normal and routine test done to check the health of a woman's cervix and the surrounding area. An HPV infection that is not diagnosed can become cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva or anus³. Regular Pap tests can detect early cell changes on the cervix caused by HPV.

During a Pap test, the doctor or nurse will use a plastic or metal instrument called a speculum to widen the opening of the vagina for a better view of the cervix. The doctor or nurse will collect a



