



Australian Government

Cancer Australia

National Centre for

Gynaecological Cancers

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer that arises from the tissues of the cervix. It can also be called cancer of the cervix.

The cervix

The cervix is part of the female reproductive system, which also comprises the uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, vagina and vulva.

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. It is sometimes called the neck of the uterus.

The functions of the cervix include:

- producing some of the moistness that lubricates the vagina
- producing the mucus that helps sperm travel up to the fallopian tube to fertilise an egg from the ovary
- holding a developing baby in the uterus during pregnancy. During childbirth, the cervix widens to allow the baby to pass down into the birth canal (vagina).

The cervix is covered by two kinds of cells: squamous and glandular. The squamous cells are flat, thin cells found in the outer layer of the cervix (ectocervix). The glandular cells are found in the cervical canal (endocervix). The point where these two cells meet is called the squamocolumnar junction.

What is cancer?

Cancer is a group of many related diseases. All cancers begin in cells, the body's basic building blocks.

Normally, cells grow and multiply in an orderly way.

However, damaged genes can cause them to behave abnormally. They may grow into a lump called a tumour.

Tumours can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer).

Polyps, cysts, and genital warts are types of benign growths on the cervix.

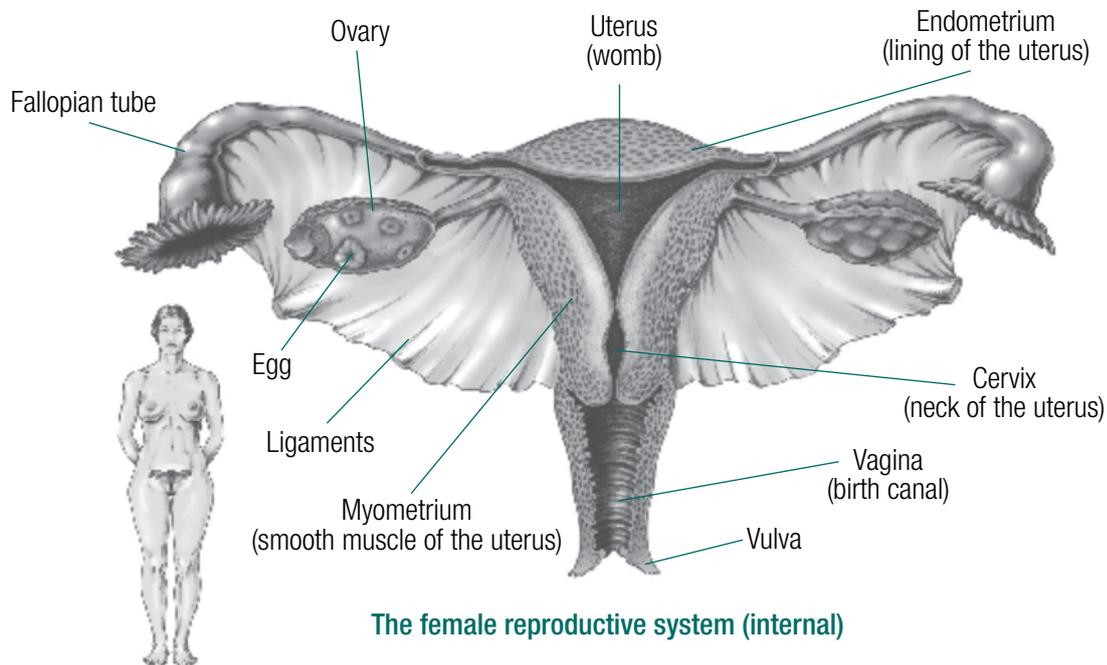
A malignant tumour is made up of cancer cells. If these cells are not treated, they may spread beyond their normal boundaries and into surrounding tissues, becoming invasive cancer. This spread of cancer is called metastasis.

When cancer spreads from its original place to another part of the body, the new tumour has the same kind of abnormal cells and the same name as the primary tumour.

For more information about cancer and how it spreads, see our factsheet [What is cancer?](#)

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The female reproductive system (internal)

Types of cervical cancer

The two main types of cervical cancer are named after the type of cells from which they originate:

- **Squamous cell carcinoma.** This is the most common type of cervical cancer, accounting for about 80 per cent of all cases. It starts in the skin-like squamous cells of the cervix.
- **Adenocarcinoma.** This is a less common type of cervical cancer, which develops from the glandular cells. Adenocarcinoma is more difficult to diagnose because it originates higher in the cervix and is more difficult to reach with the brush or spatula used in taking a Pap test.

Cervical cancer can metastasise (spread) to other parts of the body through the lymphatic system, which is a network of tissues, capillaries, vessels, ducts and nodes that pump lymph fluid through the body. Lymph fluid removes excess fluid, protein and bacteria from the body.

Cervical cancer can be microinvasive or invasive:

- **Microinvasive cancer** occurs when cancer cells have broken through the boundary between the surface of the cervix (epithelium) and the underlying tissue (stroma). At this stage, the cells have not spread more than five millimetres into the tissues of the cervix.

- **Invasive cervical cancer** is when cancer cells have spread into the underlying stroma to a depth of more than five millimetres. The cancer may have also spread to the vagina, the lymph nodes, other tissues surrounding the cervix, or into nearby organs such as the bladder or rectum.

Staging and grading of cervical cancer

The stage of a cancer is a term used to describe its size and whether it has spread beyond its original area of the body.

The grade of a cancer describes how quickly the tumour is likely to grow.

Knowing the extent of the cancer and the grade helps the doctors to decide on the most appropriate treatment.

Staging

If tests find cervical cancer, one of the following stages will be used to describe your cancer:

- **Stage 0:** Abnormal cells are found only in the first layer of the cells lining the cervix. For more information see our factsheet, [Prevention of cervical cancer](#).
- **Stage 1:** The cancer is found only in the tissues of the cervix.
- **Stage 2:** The tumour has spread beyond the cervix to the vagina and tissues next to the cervix.

- **Stage 3:** The cancer has spread throughout the pelvic area.
- **Stage 4:** The cancer has spread beyond the pelvic area to nearby organs such as the bladder or rectum. The tumour may also have spread to the lung, liver or bones, although this is uncommon.
- **Recurrent:** If the cancer comes back after initial treatment, this is known as recurrent cancer. Cervical cancer may come back in the cervix or in another part of the body.

Grading

A pathologist will use tests on your cancer biopsy to 'grade' your cancer. Grade refers to the extent of similarity of cancer cells to normal cells. Low-grade tumours tend to grow more slowly while high-grade tumours grow faster and spread more quickly.

Sources

We thank the following organisations for allowing their information to be used for this factsheet:

Cancer Council New South Wales
www.cancerCouncil.com.au

National Cancer Institute (USA)
www.cancer.gov

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

CANCER AUSTRALIA

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The National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers is an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for women affected by gynaecological cancers, their families and carers, and to lessen the impact of cancer on their lives. It has been established by Cancer Australia.

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