



Australian Government

Cancer Australia

National Centre for
Gynaecological Cancers

NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

What is vaginal cancer?

Vaginal cancer is a cancer in the tissues of the vagina. It can also be called cancer of the vagina.

The vagina

The vagina is a muscular tube that extends from the opening of the uterus (called the cervix) to the external part of a woman's sex organs (the vulva). The vagina is also called the birth canal. The uterus is also called the womb.

The vagina is the passageway through which menstrual blood flows, sexual intercourse occurs, and a baby is born.

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).

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?](#)

Types of vaginal cancer

There are two main types of vaginal cancer: those that start in the vagina itself (primary vaginal cancer), and those that spread into the vagina from another part of the body (secondary vaginal cancer). This information is about primary vaginal cancer.

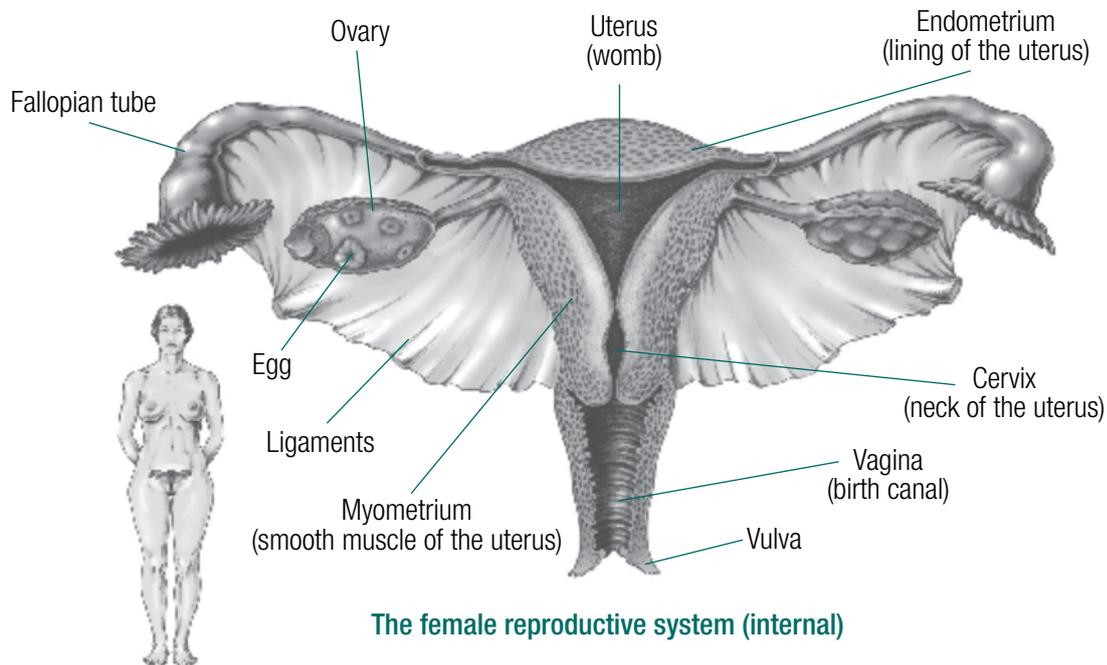
Primary vaginal cancer

There are two main types of primary vaginal cancers. They are named after the cells from which they develop:

- **Squamous cell.** The most common type of vaginal cancer is called squamous cell carcinoma, which means the cancer originated from the skin cells. This is usually found in the upper part of the vagina, and most commonly affects women between the ages of 50 and 70.

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The female reproductive system (internal)

- **Adenocarcinoma.** This type of vaginal cancer begins in the glandular cells in the lining of the vagina. It usually affects women under 20, but occasionally occurs in other age groups.

Other very rare types of vaginal cancer include melanoma, small cell carcinoma, sarcoma, and lymphoma.

Secondary vaginal cancer

Secondary cancers in the vagina (those that have spread from other parts of the body) are more common than primary vaginal cancer. They usually spread from the cervix, the lining of the womb (the endometrium), the vulva or from nearby organs such as the bladder or bowel.

Staging and grading of vaginal 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 vaginal cancer, one of the following stages will be used to describe your cancer:

- **Stage 1:** The cancer is only in the vagina and has not spread.
- **Stage 2:** The cancer has begun to spread through the wall of the vagina, but has not spread further into the walls of the pelvis.
- **Stage 3:** The cancer has spread to the pelvis and may also be in the lymph nodes close to the vagina.
- **Stage 4:** The cancer has spread to the bladder or the bowel, or to other parts of the body such as the lungs.
- **Recurrent:** If the cancer comes back after initial treatment, this is known as recurrent cancer. Vaginal cancer may come back in the vagina or in another part of the body.

Grading

Grading refers to the appearance of the cancer cells under the microscope and gives an idea of how quickly the cancer may develop.

Low grade means the cancer cells look like the normal cells. They are usually slow growing and are less likely to spread.

High grade means the cells look very abnormal. They are likely to grow more quickly and to spread.

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

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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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National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers, Cancer Australia, PO Box 1201, Dickson ACT 2602

Tel: 02 6217 9818 | Email: gynaecentre@canceraustralia.gov.au