

What is cervical cancer (cancer of opening of uterus) Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and screening Pap test

What are the facts about cervical cancer screening?

The opening of uterus in the vagina is called cervix. Cervical cancer is one of the most common cancers in women worldwide especially in developing countries. About 500,000 women are diagnosed with end-stage cancer of cervix throughout the world resulting in death of 273,000 women. Most of these females are in developing countries.

Cancer of the cervix is third most common after breast and oral cavity cancers in females. Though it is a preventable and treatable cancer, the mortality rate is very high due to late stage of presentation when cancer is advanced and lack of screening, prevention, and vaccination for HPV.

Symptoms of cervical cancer

Most cases of this cancer have no symptoms. The earliest symptom is bleeding after intercourse. Other symptoms may be unpleasant vagina discharge and bleeding between periods. About 80% women who developed cervical cancer have not received any screening test.

What causes cervical cancer?

The primary cause of cervical cancer is human papilloma virus (HPV). It is contracted by sexual contact including women who have sex with women. The majority of women clear this virus naturally by their immune system but if they don't, it changes the cervical cells to cancer cells.

How is it diagnosed?

It is diagnosed by HPV test that will detect the HPV virus. In this test, cervical cells are taken with help of a brush and seen under microscope. If cells are abnormal or HPV is positive, then further biopsy of cervix is done.

Is cervical cancer preventable?

Yes, it is preventable. There is a vaccine against HPV that should be included in the National immunization program in Pakistan. Every female after 25 years of age should have a cervical screening test and should get an early treatment if diagnosed. Late diagnoses lead to majority of deaths and burden on the health system. If any female has got any abnormal symptoms before 25 years of age, she should get this test as soon as possible. Early diagnosis saves life.

If you need a Pap test or HPV screening, you can visit Dr Sadaf Sarwar at Australian Polyclinic.