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Keeping cervical cancer in check

What causes cervical cancer?

Most often, infection with a virus known as human papilloma virus (HPV). This virus spreads through sexual contact.

Prevention tip #1: Protect yourself against HPV infection. Talk to your doctor, especially about the HPV vaccine.

How does it grow?

Slowly. It begins with small changes in the cells that line the cervix. It can stay in this early stage for two to ten years before invading nearby tissue.

Prevention tip #2: Find and treat these small changes early. Talk to your doctor about **pelvic exams and Pap tests**.

HPV vaccine

Ask your doctor if it is right for you. He or she will give you the shot based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations.

What's recommended: A series of 3 shots over 6 months.

For: Girls and women under the age of 26, starting at age 11 and 12.

Note: The vaccine is most effective if you get it before exposure to HPV (before you are sexually active). This is why the CDC recommends for girls as young as 11.

If you get the vaccine, it is still important to get regular pelvic exams and Pap tests. The exams and screenings are your second line of defense.

Pelvic exam and Pap test

A Pap test helps find changes in the cervix that may lead to cancer. It's a simple test that doctors perform as part of a pelvic or gynecology exam.

For women 21 years old and older

Ask your doctor what's right for you.

What's recommended

Pelvic exam — Usually, once a year.

Pap test — Every 1 – 3 years based on age, risk factors and earlier Pap results.

Good news: Pap tests can help spot cervical changes early when they are most treatable. Abnormal tests do not automatically mean cancer. In fact, removing abnormal cells early can help prevent cancer from developing and spreading.

Find out more about Pap tests and HPV. Visit the Aetna IntelliHealth® website at www.intelihealth.com.

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