



Patient education: Cervical dysplasia (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is cervical dysplasia?

This is when a person has abnormal cells on their cervix. The cervix is the bottom part of the uterus, where it meets the vagina ([figure 1](#)).

Abnormal cells can sometimes turn into cervical cancer if not treated. You might hear the term "precancer." But cervical dysplasia does not always lead to cancer.

Doctors use different terms to describe the abnormal cells. You might hear:

- Atypical cells, or "ASC-US"
 - Low-grade lesions (or "LSIL" or "CIN 1") – These are mild changes in the cells.
 - High-grade lesions (or "HSIL," "CIN 2," or "CIN 3") – These are moderate to severe changes in the cells.
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What causes cervical dysplasia?

Cervical dysplasia is nearly always caused by human papillomavirus, or "HPV." This is a virus that can be spread through sexual contact. Many people with HPV do not know they have it.

There is a vaccine to help prevent the types of HPV that can cause cervical dysplasia and cervical cancer.

What are the symptoms of cervical dysplasia?

Cervical dysplasia does not usually cause symptoms.

Is there a test for cervical dysplasia?

Yes. Doctors can use different tests to check for cervical dysplasia:

- Pap test – This is sometimes called a "Pap smear." It involves using a small tool to take cells from the surface of the cervix and sending them to a lab. Then, an expert checks the cells under a microscope. Pap tests are used to check, or "screen," for cervical cancer.
- Colposcopy – This is similar to a Pap test. But the doctor looks more closely at the cervix using a device that looks like a microscope. This lets them see the cervix in more detail. They can also do a "biopsy." This involves taking tiny samples of tissue from the cervix. The tissue samples are checked in a lab.

How is cervical dysplasia treated?

Treatment depends on how likely it is to lead to cervical cancer. Your risk is based on your test results and past health problems. Often, mild cervical dysplasia does not get worse, and might even improve on its own. Treatment also depends on your age.

Your doctor might recommend:

- Observation – This means not getting treatment, and instead watching the abnormal cells to see if they change over time. You might get a repeat colposcopy, a Pap test, or HPV testing.
- Removal of the abnormal cells – This is most often done with a procedure to remove part of the cervix. Sometimes, doctors do "ablation" instead. This involves using cold, heat, or lasers to destroy the abnormal cells.

Treatment for cervical dysplasia is usually very safe, but it does come with some risks. For example, it can cause bleeding, infection, and increase the risk of preterm (premature) birth if you get pregnant in the future. Your doctor will talk to you about your options and preferences.

Can cervical dysplasia be prevented?

In many cases, yes. Cervical dysplasia is usually caused by HPV. HPV can spread through sexual contact. There is a vaccine to help prevent HPV infection. It works best if you get it **before** you start having sex.

The vaccine does not cure HPV infection or cervical dysplasia if you already have it. But it might help lower the risk of having cervical dysplasia again in the future.

When should I call the doctor?

Call your doctor or nurse for advice if you have:

- Bleeding between periods
- Any vaginal bleeding and have been through menopause
- Bleeding or pain after sex
- New or different vaginal discharge
- Any other symptoms that bother you

More on this topic

[Patient education: Cervical cancer screening tests \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cervical cancer \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Human papillomavirus \(HPV\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Human papillomavirus \(HPV\) vaccine \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Colposcopy \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient education: Follow-up of low-grade abnormal Pap tests \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Follow-up of high-grade or glandular cell abnormal Pap tests \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Management of a cervical biopsy with precancerous cells \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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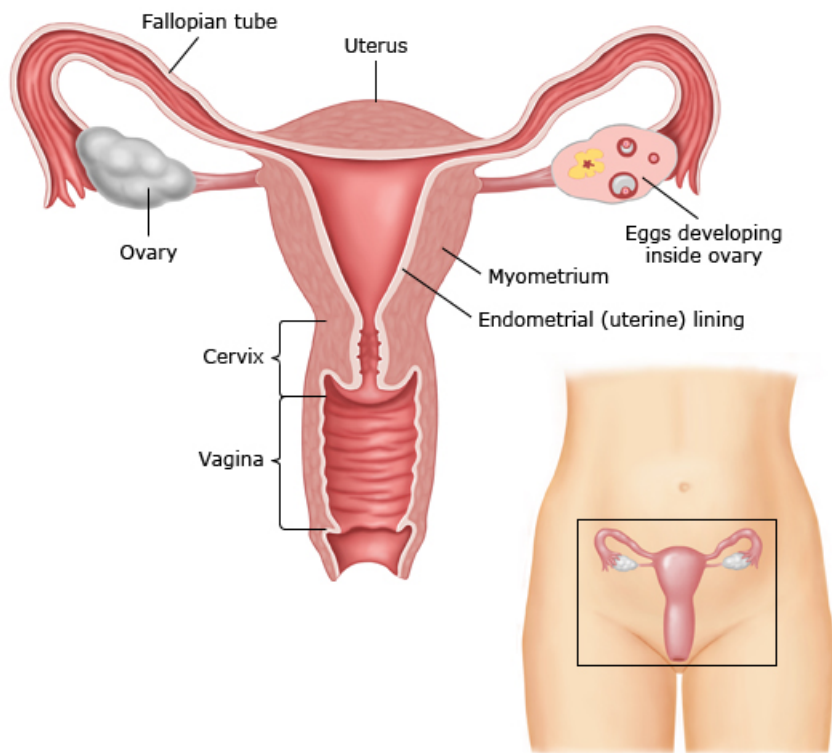
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GRAPHICS

Female reproductive anatomy



The internal organs that make up the female reproductive system are located in the lower belly. These include the uterus, fallopian tubes, ovaries, cervix, and vagina.

The uterus has an inner lining, called the "endometrium," and a thicker outer layer, called the "myometrium."

