

Vaginal and Vulvar Cancer

There are five main types of cancer that affect a woman's reproductive organs: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar. As a group, they are referred to as gynecologic (GY-neh-kuh-LAH-jik) cancer. (A sixth type of gynecologic cancer is the very rare fallopian tube cancer.)

This fact sheet about vaginal and vulvar cancers is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer* campaign. The campaign helps women get the facts about gynecologic cancer, providing important "inside knowledge" about their bodies and health.



What are vaginal and vulvar cancers?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. Cancer is always named for the part of the body where it starts, even if it spreads to other body parts later.

When cancer starts in the vagina, it is called vaginal cancer. The vagina, also called the birth canal, is the hollow, tube-like channel between the bottom of the uterus and the outside of the body.

When cancer forms in the vulva, it is vulvar cancer. The vulva is

the outer part of the female genital organs. It has two folds of skin, called the labia. Vulvar cancer most often occurs on the inner edges of the labia.

When vaginal and vulvar cancers are found early, treatment is most effective.

Who gets vaginal and vulvar cancers?

While all women are at risk for these cancers, few will get them. Vaginal and vulvar cancers are very rare. Together, they account for 6-7 percent of all gynecologic cancers diagnosed in the U.S., with an estimated 1,000 women diagnosed with vaginal cancer and 3,500 women with vulvar cancer each year.

Are there tests that can find vaginal and vulvar cancers early?

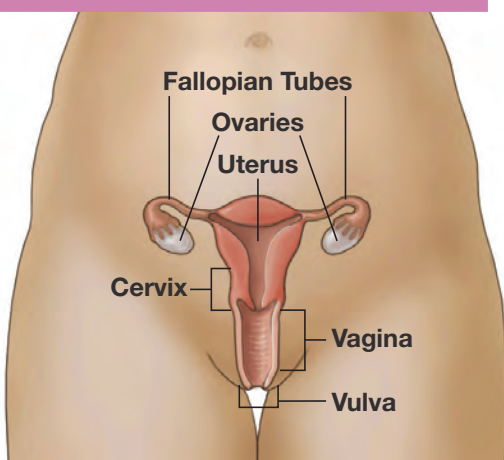
You should visit your doctor regularly for a checkup. During your checkup, your doctor may perform a pelvic examination to look for signs of vaginal and vulvar cancer. **The Pap test does not screen for vaginal and vulvar cancers. The only cancer the Pap test screens for is cervical cancer.**

Can the HPV vaccine prevent vaginal and vulvar cancers?

Many vaginal and vulvar cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that is passed from one person to another during sex.

There is a vaccine that protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. It is given in a series of three shots. The vaccine is recommended for 11 and 12 year old girls. It is also recommended for girls and women aged 13 through 26 who did not get any or all of the shots when they were younger. (Note: The vaccine can be given to girls beginning at age 9.)

If you or someone you care about is in this age range, talk with a doctor, nurse, or health care professional about it.



Inside Knowledge is an initiative that supports the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act of 2005, or Johanna's Law, which was unanimously passed by the U.S. House and Senate in December of 2006, and signed into law in January 2007.

What are the signs and symptoms of vaginal and vulvar cancers?

Most vaginal cancers do not cause signs or symptoms early on. When vaginal cancer does cause symptoms, they may include:

- Vaginal discharge or bleeding that is not normal for you. The bleeding may be abnormal because of how heavy it is, or when it happens, such as bleeding after you have gone through menopause; bleeding between periods; or any other bleeding that is longer or heavier than is normal for you.
- A change in bathroom habits, such as having blood in the stool or urine; going to the bathroom more often than usual; or feeling constipated.
- Pain in your pelvis or abdomen, especially when you pass urine or have sex.

Vulvar cancers often cause signs or symptoms including one or more of the following:

- Itching, burning, or bleeding on the vulva that does not go away.
- Color changes on the skin of the vulva, where it is redder or whiter than normal for you.
- Skin changes on the vulva, including what looks like a rash or warts.
- Sores, lumps, or ulcers on the vulva that do not go away.
- Pain in your pelvis, especially when you urinate or have sex.

Pay attention to your body, and know what is normal for you. If you have vaginal bleeding that is not normal for you, see a doctor right away. If you have any of the other signs that may be associated with vaginal or vulvar cancer, and they last for two weeks or longer, see a doctor. These symptoms may be caused by something other than cancer, but the only way to know is to see your doctor.

What raises a woman's chance of getting vaginal or vulvar cancer?

There is no way to know for sure if you will get vaginal or vulvar cancer. Some women get these cancers without being at high risk. However, the following factors may increase a woman's risk for vaginal or vulvar cancer:

- Having HPV.
- Having had cervical precancer or cervical cancer.
- Having a condition (such as HIV, the virus that can lead to AIDS) that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems.
- Smoking.
- Having chronic vulvar itching or burning.

If one or more of these things is true for you, it does not mean you will get vaginal or vulvar cancer. But you should speak with your doctor to see if he or she recommends more frequent exams.

How can I prevent vaginal and vulvar cancers?

- Get the HPV vaccine. It protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. If you are between the ages of 9 and 26, talk to your doctor about the HPV vaccine.
- Take steps to reduce your risk of getting HPV or HIV, such as avoiding sex or limiting your number of sexual partners.
- Don't smoke.

What should I do if my doctor says I have vaginal or vulvar cancer?

If your doctor says that you have vaginal or vulvar cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist—a doctor who has been trained to treat cancers like these. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.



Where can I find more information about vaginal, vulvar, and other gynecologic cancers?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 1-800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/cancer

National Cancer Institute: 1-800-4-CANCER or www.cancer.gov

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