

Women's Health



Cervical Cancer 101

Cervical cancer was once the leading cause of cancer death for women in the U.S.

In the past 40 years, the number has decreased significantly because more women are getting regular Pap tests, which detect cervical cancer in its earliest stages, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. Still, all women are at risk for cervical cancer.

CERVICAL CANCER AND HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)

A long-lasting HPV infection is the main cause of cervical cancer, the CDC says. HPV is a common virus that is passed between people during sex, and at least half of sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives. The HPV vaccine, which can be given as early as 11 years old, along with regular screenings can help prevent cervical cancer.

SYMPTOMS

Cervical cancer may not immediately cause any symptoms. It's not until the cancer becomes more advanced that one may see bleeding or discharge from the vagina. Any bleeding or discharge that's unusual for you warrants a call to the doctor, even if you aren't worried about cancer.

Some symptoms of more advanced cervical cancer include:

- Vaginal bleeding after intercourse, between periods



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or after menopause.

- Watery, bloody vaginal discharge that may be heavy and have a foul odor.
- Pelvic pain or pain during sex.

TYPES OF CERVICAL CANCER

There are two main types of

cervical cancer, according to the Mayo Clinic. Squamous cell carcinoma begins in the thin, flat cells — squamous cells — lining the outer part of the cervix, which projects into the vagina. Most cervical cancers are this type. There's also adenocarcinoma, which begins in the column-shaped

glandular cells that line the cervical canal. Very rarely, cancer can occur in other cells in the cervix.

RISK FACTORS

You can increase your chances of getting cervical cancer by increasing your odds of getting HPV. This includes

early sexual activity, having many sexual partners and having other sexually transmitted infections. You may also be more likely to develop cervical cancer if you smoke, have a weakened immune system, or were exposed to a miscarriage prevention drug called diethylstilbestrol.

Immune Health

After two years of a pandemic, keeping the immune system healthy and functioning at its highest level is on everyone's mind.

Usually, our immune systems do a terrific job of fighting off the many viruses, bacteria and other microorganisms that want to harm us. Here are a few ways we can give our immune systems a leg up on keeping us healthy.

LIFESTYLE LINKS

There are no definitive links between lifestyle changes and immune health, Harvard University says, but it only makes sense that the effects of diet, exercise, stress and other factors should have an affect on our immune responses. Healthy living also goes hand-in-hand with other health benefits that will help our bodies fight off illness by keeping the rest of its functions in tip-top shape.

MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES

Some lifestyle choices you can make that may give your immune system a boost are:

- Not smoking.
- Eating fruits and vegetables.
- Getting regular exercise.
- Maintaining a healthy weight.
- If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation.
- Get enough sleep.



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- Wash your hands.
- Minimize stress.
- Keep up with your recommended vaccine schedule.

IMMUNITY AND AGE

Our immune responses become reduced as we age, contributing to more infections and cancers than when we were younger. As we live longer lives, the incidences of age-related conditions has nec-

essarily increased. The increased risk may be associated with a reduction of function in the thymus, an organ in the immune system that produces T-cells that attack foreign invaders such as viruses. Older people also tend to eat less and may be deficient in essential vitamins and minerals that are necessary for a healthy immune system.

If you suspect that you may

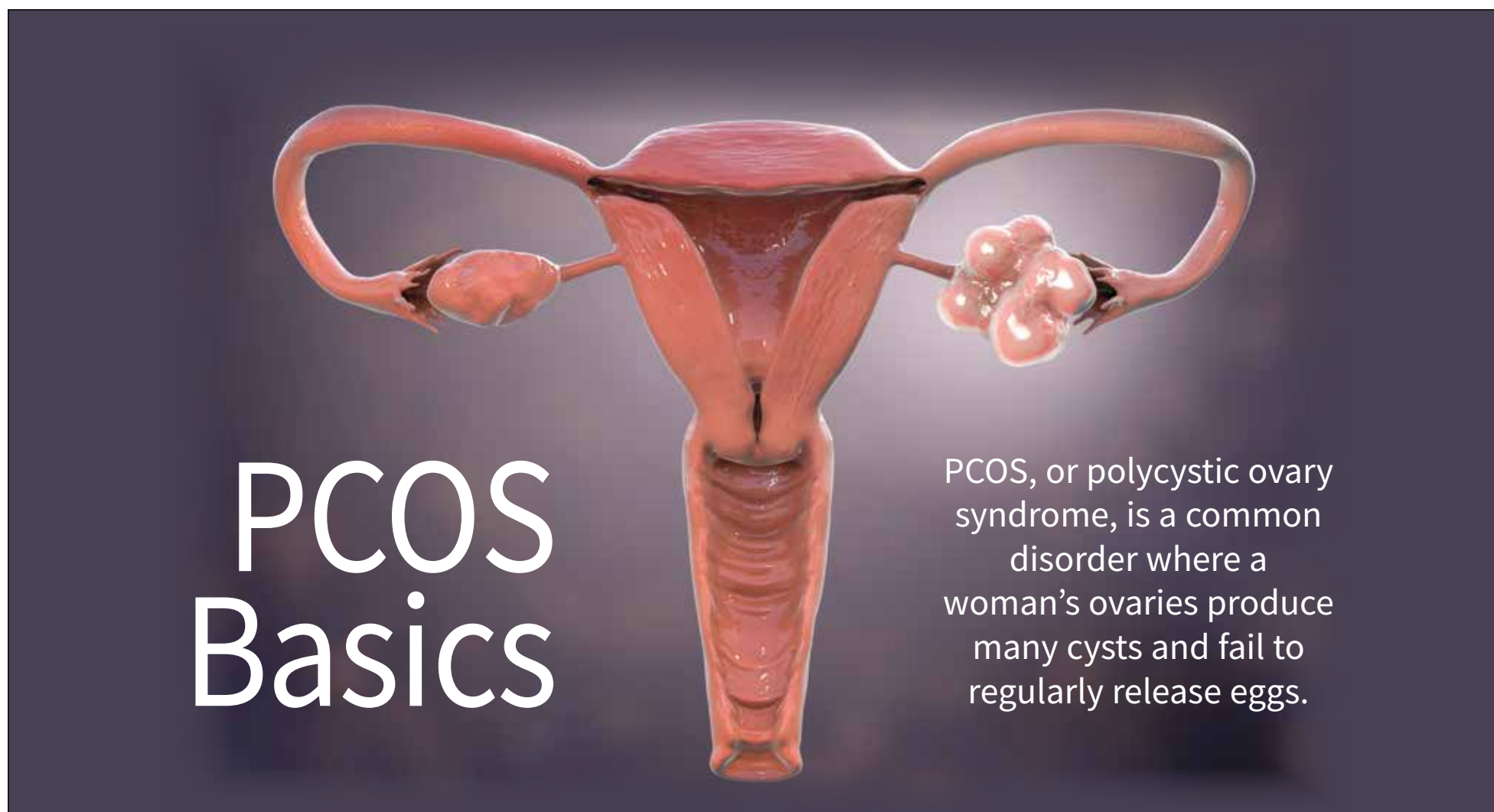
be deficient in micronutrients like vitamins and minerals, try taking a daily multivitamin. Avoid megadoses of any one single vitamin, Harvard says, as more doesn't necessarily mean better.

SUPPLEMENTS AND STRESS

Harvard says that while some over-the-counter pills and herbal supplements claim

to support or boost the immune system, there's no evidence yet that they actually do. What scientists do know is that emotional stress can affect our health, and while it can't be quantified, that includes the immune system.

Lowering stress levels is part of a general healthy lifestyle, which can make sure you stay healthier overall, including staying well.



PCOS Basics

PCOS, or polycystic ovary syndrome, is a common disorder where a woman's ovaries produce many cysts and fail to regularly release eggs.

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The exact cause of PCOS is unknown, but early diagnosis and treatment may reduce the risk of long-term complications such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, the Mayo Clinic says.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of PCOS generally appear around the time of a woman's first menstrual period. However, it can appear later in life if a woman has gained a substantial amount of weight.

A diagnosis of PCOS is made when a woman experiences at least two of these symptoms:

- Irregular periods, including infrequent or prolonged menstrual cycles. The periods may also be abnormally heavy.
- Excess androgen (male hormones) that may result in physical signs, such as excess facial and body hair, severe acne and male-pattern

baldness.

- Polycystic ovaries will be enlarged and contain follicles that surround the eggs. This may cause the ovaries to fail to function regularly.

PCOS signs and symptoms will be more severe if you're obese, Mayo says.

COMPLICATIONS

Some complications of PCOS can include:

- Infertility.
- Gestational diabetes or pregnancy-induced high blood pressure.
- Miscarriage or premature birth.
- Nonalcoholic steatohepatitis, a severe liver inflammation caused by fat accumulation.
- Type 2 diabetes or prediabetes.
- Sleep apnea.
- Depression, anxiety and eating disorders.
- Abnormal uterine bleeding.
- Cancer of the uterine lining.

DIAGNOSING PCOS

There's no definitive test for PCOS, the Mayo Clinic says. Your doctor will discuss your medical history. You should keep track of your menstrual periods and any changes you have experienced. Your doctor will also look for signs of excess hair growth, insulin resistance and acne, and may test your hormone levels. You may have a pelvic exam, blood tests and an ultrasound, along with additional tests for complications of PCOS, including sleep tests for sleep apnea and screening for depression and anxiety.

TREATMENT

PCOS treatment largely focuses on managing symptoms, including infertility, excess hair growth, acne and obesity. Your doctor may recommend weight loss, as that tends to improve PCOS symptoms and increase the effectiveness of medications your

doctor recommends for PCOS. Some of those medications may include combination birth control pills that contain both estrogen and progestin to decrease androgen production and regulate your hormones. This will lower your risk of endometrial cancer and correct abnormal bleeding, excess hair growth and acne. Progestin therapy can also regulate your periods and protect you against endometrial cancer. It doesn't improve androgen levels, though, and won't prevent pregnancy.

Your doctor may also prescribe pills to help you ovulate, including clomiphene, letrozole, metformin (which also lowers insulin levels) and gonadotropins. For excess hair growth, you may be given spironolactone, eflornithine cream or electrolysis treatments. Some of those medications may cause birth defects, so you will need to be on effective birth control while taking them.

Telehealth and Women

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many doctor's offices and insurance plans promoted telehealth services to reduce exposure risks for both patients and health professionals.

Since the start of the pandemic, the CDC says, telehealth services have expanded dramatically in the U.S., with up to 95% of reporting health centers saying they used telehealth during the pandemic.

While the trend spiked noticeably during the COVID-19 pandemic, it might be here to stay. The CDC points out that telehealth is critical to improve access to health care across the board. Here's what you should know about telehealth and women's health services.

WHAT IS TELEHEALTH?

Telemedicine appointments use technology such as video chats on your phone, tablet or computer to provide health care appointments. These appointments can save you on time, transportation costs and, most importantly during the pandemic, reduce exposure to illness.

Before your appointment, make sure that your device meets your provider's technical specifications. A nurse or other staff member may schedule a



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brief visit beforehand to make sure you can use the software.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health services, including therapy sessions, have seen the largest growth in telemedicine visits. The National Institute of Mental Health says that depression and anxiety, in particular, are more common in women.

Some hormonal conditions may also affect women's mental health, including perinatal depression, premenstrual dysphoric disorder and perimenopause-related depression.

OTHER APPOINTMENTS

Depending on your provider, some other types of appointments may also be available via telehealth. Women's Health

Connecticut, for example, offers obstetric appointments via telehealth, as well as postpartum check-ups, new patient visits, some gynecological problems, family planning visits and preconception care.

Secure telemedicine platforms may also allow for discussing sensitive topics such as STD screening results, Pap test results, biopsies and more.

INSURANCE COVERAGE

During the pandemic, many insurance companies were covering telehealth visits free of charge. Virtual appointments are now being billed just like any other doctor's visit. You should be prepared to pay your copay or deductible with a credit or debit card at the time of service as you would at an in-person doctor's appointment.

Pelvic Floor Primer

Most women who have had kids know the drill. Every little sneeze, giggle or cough results in a little tinkle. What's happened is that you're pelvic floor has been weakened.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be permanent.

WHAT IS YOUR PELVIC FLOOR?

The pelvic floor muscles wrap around your pelvic bone and support your pelvic organs, including your bladder, uterus, vagina and rectum. Just like any other muscles, these muscles tense and relax to perform certain functions. However, after pregnancy, your pelvic floor can malfunction, leading to trouble having bowel movements or leaking urine or stool.

Other conditions can also lead to pelvic floor dysfunction, the Cleveland Clinic says, including traumatic injuries, such as car accidents; overusing the pelvic muscles, such as going to the bathroom too often or pushing too hard; pelvic surgery; being overweight; and age.

SYMPTOMS OF PELVIC FLOOR DYSFUNCTION

You may feel like you need to use the bathroom frequently and, when you go, you may



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stop and start many times or feel like you have to force it out. You may also suffer from constipation, straining to eliminate, painful urination, leaking stool or urine, have lower back pain or ongoing pain in your pelvic region.

TREATING PELVIC FLOOR DYSFUNCTION

Pelvic floor dysfunction can

be treated easily in most circumstances, mostly with physical therapy. The most common treatment is biofeedback. That's where a physical therapist retrains your muscles using exercises to retrain your muscles so that coordination is improved. There are also medications you can take to keep your bowel movements soft and regular. Some are

even available over the counter, such as Colace or senna. You may also be given relaxation techniques such as meditation, warm baths, yoga or acupuncture to help your muscles relax.

In some rare cases, the Cleveland Clinic says, when physical therapy and biofeedback fail to work, you may be sent to a pain injection spe-

cialist. They will target certain muscles with numbing and relaxing medication in trigger point injections to cause those muscles to relax.

Remember to do your exercises as prescribed, take all your medications and follow your provider's instructions. Pelvic floor dysfunction is treatable, but the symptoms won't disappear on their own.

Women's Heart Health

Heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the U.S., the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says, killing 299,578 women in 2017.

That's one in every five female deaths. About one in 16 women over the age of 20 have coronary heart disease.

SYMPTOMS OF HEART DISEASE

Some women may have no symptoms at all until they have an emergency such as heart attack. Be on the lookout for angina, a dull or heavy chest pain or discomfort; pain in the neck, jaw or throat; pain in the upper abdomen or back; nausea, vomiting and fatigue not associated with any other ailment.

Signs of a heart attack include chest pain or discomfort, upper back or neck pain, indigestion, heartburn, nausea or vomiting, extreme fatigue, upper body discomfort, dizziness and shortness of breath.

You may also have palpitations, a fluttering feeling in your chest that's a sign your heart isn't beating properly. Signs of heart failure include shortness of breath, fatigue and swelling of the feet, ankles, legs, abdomen or neck veins.

The American Heart Association says that, in



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women, heart attacks may present differently than with men. Women are more likely to experience shortness of breath, nausea and back or jaw pain. You may or may not experience chest pressure.

If you feel like you're having a heart attack or cardiac arrest, call 911 immediately. It's important to get lifesaving

medical treatment as quickly as possible.

RISK FACTORS FOR HEART DISEASE

About half of people in the U.S. have at least one of these risk factors for heart disease:

- High blood pressure.
- High low-density lipoprotein cholesterol.

- Smoking.

Other medical conditions and lifestyle choices can put people at more risk for heart disease, including diabetes, obesity, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity and alcohol consumption.

You can reduce your risk by getting screened regularly for high blood pressure and high

cholesterol. Stop smoking or, better yet, don't start. Discuss your weight and diabetes risk with your health professionals and make healthy food choices.

Limit your alcohol consumption and find healthy ways to cope with stress. Start an exercise program and make yourself aware of the signs and symptoms to watch out for.

Women and Skin Cancer

Skin cancer is one of the most common cancers in the U.S., the American Academy of Dermatology says, with 9,500 people diagnosed with skin cancer every day.

Women are diagnosed with skin cancer more than men, especially in cases diagnosed before age 50. The good news is that most types of skin cancer, if detected early, are easily treatable and survivable.

RISK FACTORS

Some risk factors for skin cancer include excess exposure to UV radiation from sunlight or indoor tanning, sunburns during childhood or adolescence — particularly blistering sunburns, having skin that burns easily, and having blonde or red hair.

If you're a woman that loves a bronze glow, turn toward lotions and away from indoor tanning. Tanning beds and lamps account for up to 40,000 cases of skin cancer a year, the AADA says, and the younger a person is when they start tanning and the more they use it, the higher the risk.

SYMPTOMS

Skin cancer occurs when skin cells grow and multiply in an uncontrolled way. So many signs of skin cancer are



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unusual growths. Skin cancer is most common in sun-exposed areas of skin, such as your face, ears, neck, arms, chest, upper back, hands and legs. However, it can also develop in other areas, such as between your toes, under your fingernails, on the palms of your hand and soles of your feet, and in your genital area.

The most common symptom of skin cancer is a new or unusual change in a skin growth. A small, smooth, pearly bump can indicate basal cell carcinoma, one of

the most common cancers in sun-exposed areas. Also look for a flat, pink- red- or brown-colored lesion on the trunk or arms or legs; areas that look like scars; and sores that look crusty, have a depression in the middle or bleed often.

A firm red or pink nodule that forms on sun-exposed areas or on the mucus membranes can be squamous cell carcinoma. Also look for a rough, scaly lesion that may itch, bleed or become crusty.

Melanoma can form any-

where. Symptoms include a brown patch or bump; a mole that changes in color or size, or that bleeds; a large mole or a mole with more than one color.

DIAGNOSIS

Your dermatologist can diagnose skin cancer by examining your skin and any spots of concern. They may perform a biopsy by removing some tissue and sending it to the lab for testing. The good news is that skin cancer, caught early, is treatable. Sometimes,

removing the lump is enough, but you may also receive surgery, cryotherapy, radiation, chemotherapy or other therapies to remove the cancer.

PREVENTION

Wear sunscreen and protect yourself from exposure to UV rays with hats, long-sleeved shirts, sunglasses and staying indoors when you can. Some medications may also make your skin more sensitive to sunlight; ask your pharmacist or health care professional for more information.