

The cervix is at the neck of the uterus (womb), is about 2.5 cm long and has a small break through it.

What to look for

- vaginal discharge.
- painful intercourse.
- vaginal bleeding, sometimes during or after intercourse.
- unusually heavy menstrual periods.
- crampy pelvic pain or a feeling of heaviness.

Many cervical problems have no symptoms.

The cervix is the part that connects the uterus to the vagina. At its center is the external opening of the cervix, that provides an exit for tissue of the uterus and blood during menstruation and allows sperm to enter. On the uterine side is the cervical canal, a narrow, inch-long passageway leading into the uterus. During childbirth the cervix thins and gradually opens, or dilates, to allow for the delivery of the child.

The part of the cervix that protrudes into the vagina is covered with pink tissue. The part that extends into the cervical canal is covered with red, mucus-producing tissue.

Cervicitis is the inflammation of the cervix. Symptoms include a discharge that is grayish, green, white, or yellow. Other symptoms may include pain during intercourse or backache.

Another common condition of the cervix is cervical erosion. Cervical erosion occurs when the cells on the inside of the cervix start to grow on the outside. There are usually no symptoms, although occasionally the conditions may cause a whitish or slightly bloody vaginal discharge.

Other conditions involving the cervix include cervical stenosis (partial or total narrowing of the cervix, which can lead to obstruction) and cervical incompetence, the premature opening of the cervix during pregnancy, which creates a high risk of miscarriage.

Cysts and polyps may form on the cervix. Cervical cysts occur without symptoms and require no treatment. Cervical polyps are also usually harmless, although they may cause irregular bleeding and discharge. Polyps can be removed surgically because of the uncomfortable presence of irregular bleeding and they may affect fertility.

Genital warts can also infect the cervix. These warts are caused by the human papilloma virus, and there are many subtypes, several of which are associated with an increased risk of cervical cancer.

Dysplasia is another potentially serious cervical condition. It describes the abnormal development of cervical cells. Dysplasia is considered a pre-cancerous condition because, if untreated, it leads to cervical cancer in 30 to 50 percent of cases. Although cervical dysplasia strikes women of all ages, it most commonly afflicts women aged 25 to 35. The only way to detect the condition is with a Pap smear test.

Causes

The causes of cervical problems are many and varied. Cervicitis may be to do with sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea, syphilis or Chlamydia. In some instances a difficult childbirth can cause an infection.

What causes cervical erosion is not always clear however, the friction of intercourse appears to be a factor as well as the contraceptive pill and IUD.

Cervical polyps often develop after an infection as the body grows new cells to cover the old, inflamed ones or they can develop due to hormonal changes.

Cervical warts are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV), which is transmitted by sexual contact.

Cervical dysplasia is caused by a subtype of the human papilloma virus, which also causes cervical cancer, but not everyone who is exposed to the virus develops dysplasia or cancer, indicating that other factors are also at work.

The first test used to diagnose cervical problems is the Pap smear, a simple procedure in which cells are collected from the cervix and examined under a microscope. If the Pap smear indicates a pre-cancerous or cancerous condition, a cervical biopsy (removal of tissue from the cervix for examination) will also be done.

Traditional Treatment

Some harmless cervical problems, such as erosion and cysts, often require no treatment. Other conditions can be treated with both alternative and conventional methods. For dysplasia or cancer, however, you should always seek conventional treatment.

Conventional medical treatments for cervical problems depend on the condition.

Cervicitis is usually treated with an antibiotic or sulfur drug. Your doctor will probably recommend that you refrain from intercourse until the infection has cleared up to keep it from spreading.

If necessary, cervical cysts and polyps can be removed surgically in your doctor's office. Surgery to remove blockage caused by cervical stenosis is usually done in the hospital.

Mild cases of cervical dysplasia are treated with laser surgery, which uses a high-energy beam of light to destroy the affected tissue. If you have recurring dysplasia that fails to respond to treatment, you should be screened for HIV infection.

Prevention

- Practice sexual abstinence or use condoms during sexual intercourse
- Use barrier methods of birth control (condoms, diaphragms, or cervical caps) when having sex. Such methods offer some protection against sexually transmitted diseases, which can lead to cervical problems.
- To help prevent cervicitis, eat plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits. These foods are rich in vitamin C, beta carotene (vitamin A), folic acid, and other nutrients that strengthen the immune system and help fight off some infections.
- Stop smoking

When to Seek Professional Advice

- You should seek a medical diagnosis if you have any of the above symptoms.