



# January Health Topics

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## What Every Woman Can Do to Help Prevent Birth Defects

**Like all pregnant women, your main concern is having a healthy baby. Help prevent birth defects by taking extra care throughout your pregnancy.**

Like every pregnant woman, all you want is a healthy baby. And though preventing some birth defects may be out of your control, you can help avoid others by taking certain precautions.

About 150,000 babies are born each year with at least one birth defect. Some birth defects are genetic, passed down from one or both parents. Others are a result of lifestyle habits.

There are two types of birth defects:

- **Structural.** These defects involve a missing or malformed body part. Heart defects are the most common structural defects, occurring in one out of 125 babies. Another common structural disorder is spina bifida, which affects one in 2,000 babies. Club foot and cleft palate fall into this category as well.
- **Functional.** These defects affect how a certain body system or part works. They include:
  - o **Nervous system problems**, including mental retardation and other developmental delays. Down syndrome is one of the more common birth defects affecting the nervous system.
  - o **Sensory problems**, such as blindness and hearing loss.
  - o **Metabolic disorders**, including thyroid disease and PKU (phenylketonuria), a metabolic disorder that can cause brain damage.
  - o **Degenerative disorders**, which might not be seen at birth but become apparent as they continue to develop over time. Examples are Rett syndrome and muscular dystrophy.

### Risk factors

Before you get pregnant, you can talk to a genetic counselor if you are at higher risk for passing on an inherited disease. You might be at risk due to your family history, race, ethnicity, age and other factors. Testing can often help you find out if the baby you're carrying is healthy or not. Ask your doctor if you are at increased risk for having a child with birth defects.

Other risk factors are environmental and can often be prevented. They include:

- Alcohol and drug abuse. Alcohol use in pregnancy can lead to fetal alcohol syndrome. This can cause mental and physical birth defects.
- Infections.
- Exposure to certain medications.
- Exposure to certain chemicals.



### Preventing birth defects

If you're pregnant or planning on becoming pregnant, you can take steps to help avoid birth defects. The following tips can help:

- Make sure your medications (including over-the-counter) are safe to take during pregnancy.
- Ask your doctor about prenatal vitamins.
- Take folic acid to help prevent birth defects of the brain and spine.
- Make sure you've had all the required vaccinations before you become pregnant. Ask your doctor what vaccines you should have and how long you should wait to become pregnant after you get them.
- Tell your doctor if you or your partner has a family history of birth defects.
- Avoid exposure to insecticides and other harmful chemicals.
- Use condoms to help protect against STDs.
- Once pregnant, have regular prenatal care. Get the tests and screenings your doctor recommends.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- If you have a cat, let someone else empty the litter box. Contact with a dirty litter box can spread toxoplasmosis, a parasitic infection that can harm your unborn baby.
- Don't smoke, drink alcohol or use drugs.
- Make sure all meat is cooked thoroughly.
- Don't use hot tubs or saunas if you may be pregnant.
- Avoid people who have infectious diseases.
- Wash your hands before and after preparing meals, especially after handling raw meat.

Don't take chances with your unborn baby's life. You may think you're being overly cautious, but you'll be glad you were when you're rewarded with a healthy, bouncing baby.

# Cervical Cancer Basics

**Learn about the link between HPV and cervical cancer, how to recognize the symptoms, and how Pap tests can help prevent it.**



Cervical cancer can be prevented, and it can be cured if it's found early. But it usually has no symptoms. The only way to detect it is with a Pap test (or smear), a standard screening test for women. Pap tests save lives. Most women who die of cervical cancer have not had a recent Pap test.

The cervix is the lower end of a woman's uterus. It connects the uterus and the vagina. Cervical cancer can develop when cells lining the cervix grow in a disorderly fashion. This cancer is usually caused by a virus called human papillomavirus, or HPV. HPV is spread through sexual contact. Most women who are sexually active have been exposed to HPV. In most cases, a woman's body can fight HPV. In some, it can cause cervical cancer.

## Does every woman with HPV get cervical cancer?

No. Doctors don't yet know why some women with HPV get cervical cancer while others do not. But certain risk factors increase the risk of a woman with HPV getting cervical cancer. They include:

- Smoking
- Starting sexual activity at an early age (16 or younger)
- Having many sexual partners (the more partners, the higher the risk)
- Having other STDs, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, or HIV/AIDS
- Using birth control pills

Luckily, cervical cancer is a slow-growing disease. A regular Pap test can help find any abnormal changes in the cervix that need to be checked.

## What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

Symptoms of cervical cancer usually don't appear until precancerous cervical cells become cancerous and invade nearby tissue. Precancerous changes in the cervix don't cause pain or abnormal bleeding. So there is usually no way for a woman to know that she has precancerous cervical cells.

The most common symptom of cervical cancer is abnormal bleeding. This could include:

- Any spotting or bleeding that occurs between normal periods, after sexual intercourse or douching, or during a pelvic exam
- Menstrual bleeding that lasts longer and is heavier than usual
- Increased vaginal discharges
- Painful intercourse
- Bleeding after menopause

These symptoms can also be caused by conditions other than cervical cancer. See your doctor if you have any of these problems.

## How can cervical cancer be prevented?

Regular pelvic examinations and Pap tests to identify and treat precancerous conditions are the most effective ways to prevent cervical cancer. You can help prevent sexually transmitted diseases like HPV by limiting your number of sexual partners, avoiding partners with high-risk sexual histories, and using a condom.

There is now a vaccine that can help prevent several common types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer. This vaccine is approved for use in young men and women ages 9 through 26. Not all types of HPV virus are prevented by this vaccine, though, so females still need routine Pap tests.

Smoking is also linked to cervical cancer – another good reason to not smoke.

# How Is Glaucoma Diagnosed?

**Find out how glaucoma is diagnosed. Early detection can prevent blindness in most cases.**

Glaucoma is a disease that can sneak up on you and rob you of your vision. Although it can produce symptoms, the best way to detect the disease is by having regular eye examinations. Early detection and treatment can prevent blindness in 90 percent of people with glaucoma.

### Symptoms of open-angle glaucoma

Open-angle glaucoma, the most common form of the disease, does not have symptoms at first. Vision is normal and there is no pain. If the disease is not treated, however, vision can become blurry and side vision might be lost. You may feel you are looking through a tunnel. Over time, your remaining forward vision may decrease until no vision remains.

### Symptoms of angle-closure glaucoma

Angle-closure glaucoma can cause a sudden increase in eye pressure (acute glaucoma), which is a [medical emergency](#). If it occurs, seek treatment immediately. Symptoms include:

- Redness and swelling
- Blurred vision
- Severe eye pain
- Headache
- Rainbow-colored halos around lights
- Nausea and vomiting
- A red eye with a cloudy center
- Pain around eyes after watching TV or leaving a dark theater



### Tests for glaucoma

Regular eye examinations include testing for glaucoma. The following are standard:

- **A standard eye chart** measures how well you see at various distances.
- **A visual field test** measures your side (peripheral) vision. In computerized visual field testing, you are asked to push a button each time you see a flash of light. Your doctor will then receive a printout of your visual field. In another test (Goldmann perimeter), the doctor records your answers, and no computer is used.
- **A tonometer** measures the pressure inside the eye. In one type (applanation tonometry), your doctor first inserts eye drops to reduce pain. A plastic prism will then lightly push against your eye to measure the pressure. In air tonometry, a puff of air is applied to the cornea. The eye's resistance to the air is measured to determine eye pressure.
- **An ophthalmoscope** enables your doctor to look at the optic nerve through the pupil of your eye. The color and appearance of the nerve can indicate damage from glaucoma. Before the test is done, eye drops will be applied to dilate (widen) the pupil. After the examination, your close-up vision may remain blurred for several hours, and your eyes will be more sensitive to light.

# Thyroid Disease in Women: Know the Symptoms

**Thyroid disorders are much more common in women than in men, but they're often missed or confused with other conditions. Do you know the symptoms?**



The thyroid is a small but powerful gland in your neck. It produces hormones that control your metabolism, or the way your body uses energy. It also influences your heart rate, body temperature, bones, digestion and reproductive system. When the thyroid hormones get out of balance, it can have profound effects on your health.

Thyroid disorders are much more common in women than in men. Yet the symptoms of thyroid disease are often overlooked or confused with other conditions. As a result, many women don't get the treatment they need. This puts them at risk for serious problems such as high cholesterol, heart disease and infertility.

## What are the most common thyroid disorders?

**Underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism)** can occur at any age, but it becomes more common as a woman ages, especially after age 50. It occurs when the thyroid doesn't make enough thyroid hormones. It may not cause noticeable symptoms at first, but as thyroid hormone levels continue to drop the metabolism slows. A woman will start to feel weak and run down and may have other symptoms such as weight gain and constipation.

**Overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism)** is most common in women between ages 20 and 40. It occurs when the thyroid makes too much thyroid hormone. A rising hormone level causes the body to speed up. This can cause a woman to feel jittery or irritable, lose weight without trying and have trouble sleeping.

**Thyroid nodules** sometimes grow on the thyroid gland. Nodules usually don't cause symptoms, but a doctor may feel a nodule during a careful physical exam. As a nodule grows it may be felt as a lump in the front of the neck.

Most thyroid nodules are harmless. Fewer than one in 10 is cancerous, but any nodule should be checked. Even a benign nodule may sometimes need to be removed.

## How do thyroid disorders affect women?

Thyroid disorders can have a range of effects on a woman's sexual and reproductive health across her lifespan.

- **Puberty.** During puberty, hyperthyroidism can cause early menstruation (before age 9). It may also cause delayed menstruation and delayed growth.
- **Infertility.** Thyroid disorders can cause irregular or skipped periods, which can make it hard to get pregnant. They also raise the risk of miscarriage.
- **Pregnancy.** During pregnancy, untreated thyroid disorders raise the risk of high blood pressure, anemia, miscarriage and low birth weight. They may also have long-term effects on the baby.
- **Postpartum depression.** Some women develop a thyroid problem after delivery called postpartum thyroid dysfunction. It causes fatigue, low mood and irritability, and it may be linked to postpartum depression.
- **Premenstrual syndrome (PMS).** Hypothyroidism can cause symptoms similar to PMS, including weight gain, bloating and depressed mood.

- **Menopause.** Thyroid disorders can cause premature menopause (before age 40). Symptoms of hyperthyroidism can mimic those of menopause, such as hot flashes and insomnia.

### What are the symptoms of thyroid disorders?

**Hypothyroidism** (underactive thyroid) may cause:

- Fatigue
- Weight gain from fluid retention
- Low tolerance of cold
- Dry skin and dry, brittle hair and nails
- Forgetfulness and trouble concentrating
- Irregular or heavy periods
- Constipation
- Miscarriages or infertility

**Hyperthyroidism** (overactive thyroid) may cause:

- Nervousness
- Sweating
- Low tolerance of heat
- Trembling hands
- Fast or irregular heartbeat
- Weight loss
- Insomnia
- More frequent bowel movements
- Light or absent menstrual periods
- Muscle weakness
- Goiter (an enlarged thyroid gland)

**Thyroid nodules** often cause no symptoms, but they may be felt as a lump in the front of the neck below the Adam's apple. A cancerous nodule may grow quickly, feel hard and cause:

- Pain
- Swollen lymph nodes under the jaw
- Hoarseness
- Trouble swallowing

If you have any symptoms of a thyroid disorder, see your doctor. Thyroid disorders can be treated successfully, usually with medication or surgery.

