

Women's Health **UPDATE**

What You Should Know About Cervical Health

(NAPSA)—Cervical health has gotten a lot of attention lately, mostly because of the strides being made in cervical cancer prevention. But what does it do, exactly? And do women really care?


A new survey by Harris Interactive showed that women actually do care—nearly 9 in 10 women said that a healthy cervix was as important to them as healthy breasts, and more than half said it was part of what makes them feel like a woman. Less than half, though, were able to name several of its specific functions.

“When women understand how important the cervix can be to their overall well-being, they will take the necessary steps, such as getting regular Pap smears, to keep their cervix healthy,” said Elizabeth Battaglino Cahill, RN, executive vice president of the National Women’s Health Resource Center (NWHRC), an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering women to make informed decisions about their health by providing objective, trustworthy information.

The cervix is the bottom part of a woman’s uterus, where it opens into the vaginal cavity. To understand exactly where it’s located, picture the uterus as an upside-down pear. The fallopian tubes reach out from the sides of the pear’s top—with the ovaries at the end of each tube—and the pear’s narrower base is the cervix.

Depending on the stage in a woman’s life, the cervix plays various roles and may look and feel differently. It protects the uterus from sexually transmitted diseases and bacteria, which may be particularly important for

Important Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What should I know about my cervix at this point in my life? What roles does it play in my overall health?
- If I’m faced with a hysterectomy, how does that affect my cervix and are there treatment options that would keep my cervix intact?
- What exactly does a hysterectomy entail? What is the normal recovery time for this procedure?
- What risks are associated? How can these be prevented or minimized?
- Are there alternative treatments or procedures I should know about? Am I a candidate? 

younger women. When a woman is trying to get pregnant, the cervix secretes sperm-nourishing mucus to help fertilization, and while she is pregnant, the cervix supports the baby’s weight. Throughout all life stages, but particularly important after having children and as a woman ages, the cervix provides support to the organs above it—including the uterus and bladder.

The cervix can open and close in varying degrees, depending on what is happening inside a woman’s body. It stays tightly closed during pregnancy to counteract the force of gravity on the fetus, opens slightly during ovulation and menstruation, and opens very widely (usually 10 cm wide) during childbirth.

Dr. Viviane Connor, co-director of minimally invasive gynecologic surgery at the prestigious Cleveland Clinic in Florida, believes that women should be informed about cervical health in order to participate in important health decisions. Very often, even women facing hysterectomy have a choice whether to keep their cervix

intact or have a full hysterectomy, which removes the entire uterus.

“There is a minimally invasive hysterectomy called a laparoscopic supracervical hysterectomy (LSH) that only takes out the top part of the uterus where the problem is and leaves the normal cervix in place,” explains Dr. Connor. “LSH also causes less scarring, is a less painful procedure and has a significantly shorter recovery time than the traditional open abdominal hysterectomy that is more common. Women who are facing hysterectomy should talk to their health care provider about whether they are a candidate for LSH.”

Most women wouldn’t choose to remove their cervix if it was healthy; in fact, 77 percent do not feel the cervix should be routinely removed with hysterectomy to prevent cervical cancer when they can have regular pap spears instead. So why are so many women having their cervix removed with hysterectomy? It could be because 73 percent of all women—and 53 percent of hysterectomy patients—had never heard about LSH.

It’s a good idea to talk to your doctor about your overall reproductive health and before having a hysterectomy—or any kind of gynecologic surgery—ask questions to find out about the procedure, associated risks and alternative treatments to make the choice that’s right for you. You can also visit www.healthywomen.org to learn more and get a free, 28-page *Your Guide to Cervical Health*, available through support from ETHICON Women’s Health & Urology, a division of ETHICON, Inc., a Johnson & Johnson company.