

Chapter 24

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Cancer and Growths



Cancer is a serious sickness that can affect many different parts of the body. If it is treated early it is often curable, but if left too long it can cause death. Many people who get cancer die from it, especially those with little access to health care.

Women often do not see a health worker or doctor unless they are very sick. So women who get cancer are more likely to get very sick or die because the cancer is not found early enough. Also, women who get cancer are sometimes considered 'cursed' and may be shunned by their families or communities. This isolation is not only bad for the women who are sick, but also for the whole community, since it keeps everyone from knowing about how cancer makes people sick.

WHAT IS CANCER?

All living things, like the human body, are made up of tiny cells that are too small to see without a microscope. Sometimes these cells change and grow in an abnormal way, causing growths (tumors). Some growths go away without treatment. But some growths get larger or spread and may cause health problems. **Most growths do not become cancer**, but some do.

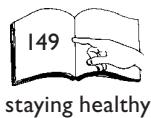


Cancer starts when some cells begin to grow out of control and take over parts of the body. When cancer is found early, it can often be removed by surgery, or treated with medicines or radiation, and the chance of it being cured may be good. Once cancer spreads, however, curing it is more difficult and eventually becomes impossible.

► 'Tumor' is another word for growth or swelling. Some tumors are cancer and some are not.

Cancer

► Cancer is not an infection. It is not 'catching' and cannot spread from one person to another.



Cancer of the cervix, breast, and womb are the most common 'women's' cancers. Other common cancers that both men and women get are cancer of the lung, colon, liver, stomach, mouth, and skin.

CAUSES OF CANCER

The direct causes of most cancers are not known. But these things may make you more likely to get cancer:

- smoking tobacco, which is known to cause lung cancer, and also increases the risk of getting most other cancers
- certain viral infections, like HIV, hepatitis B or certain types of HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)
- eating foods with too much fat or with harmful chemicals
- taking the hormone estrogen by itself for a long time after your monthly bleeding has stopped
- working with or living around certain chemicals (like pesticides, dyes, paints, and solvents)

Also, if others in a woman's family (blood relatives) have had a certain kind of cancer, this may mean she is more likely to get that same kind of cancer (this is called a hereditary risk).

Healthy living can prevent many cancers. This means eating *nutritious* food and avoiding things that may cause cancer. For example:

- Do not smoke or chew tobacco.
- Try to avoid harmful chemicals in your home or workplace, including foods grown or preserved with them.

CANCER CAN BE CURED IF IT IS FOUND AND TREATED EARLY

Finding cancer early can often save a woman's life, because she can get early treatment, before the cancer spreads. Some cancers have warning signs that show something may be wrong.



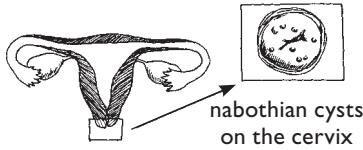
Cancer cells are so small, you need a microscope to see them.

Cancers that do not have early signs can often be found with screening tests, which are tests given to healthy people to see if everything is normal. Pap tests and Visual Inspections are both screening tests for cancer of the cervix (see page 378). A mammogram is a screening test for early signs of breast cancer.

If you have warning signs, or a test shows something may be wrong, do not wait. Follow the advice in this chapter for finding and treating the problem as soon as possible.

PROBLEMS OF THE CERVIX THAT ARE NOT CANCER

Nabothian cysts are small bumps on the cervix that are filled with fluid. There are no signs, but they can be seen during a *pelvic exam* (with a *speculum*). These cysts are harmless, so no treatment is needed.



Polyps are dark red growths, sometimes found at the cervix. They also grow inside the womb. They do not need to be treated. For more about them, see 'Common Growths of the Womb', page 380.

Inflammation of the cervix. Many infections of the vagina—like trichomonas—and some STIs affect the cervix, and can cause growths, sores, or irritation and bleeding after sex. For more information, including treatment, see the chapter on STIs.

CANCER OF THE CERVIX (CERVICAL CANCER)

Cancer of the cervix is the most common cause of death from cancer among women in many parts of the world. Most cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papilloma Virus, or HPV. There are many types of HPV and only a very few of them can cause cervical cancer. (A different type of HPV causes genital warts.)

HPV is a common infection that many people will have in their life. Most of these infections go away without treatment. HPV infections that do not go away (persistent) can slowly cause cancer. Because this cancer grows slowly, there is time to find it early and completely cure it. Unfortunately, many women die from cervical cancer because they never knew they had it.

The best time to be screened for cervical cancer is around the age of 30, and every 3 to 5 years after that.

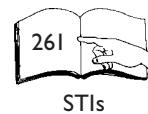
Women with HIV are more likely to get cervical cancer because their immune systems are less able to fight the HPV. They should be screened for cervical cancer even if they are younger than 30. If the results are normal, then they should be tested every 3 years.

Warning signs:

There are usually no outward signs of cancer of the cervix until it has spread and is more difficult to treat. (There may be early signs on the cervix, which can be seen during a pelvic exam. This is why regular exams are so important.)

The later warning signs are *abnormal bleeding* from the vagina, including bleeding after sex, and persistent abnormal discharge or bad smell from the vagina. If you have any of these signs, try to get a pelvic exam and a screening test.

Problems of the Cervix (the Opening of the Womb)



STIs



Mira's story

IMPORTANT

If you are treated with medicines for a vaginal discharge and do not get better, you should try to have your cervix examined and get a screening test to look for cancer.

► If you are a health worker, try to get training in testing for cervical cancer. Encourage your community to offer cancer screening and low-cost treatment (cryotherapy).



Regular testing for cancer of the cervix can save many lives.

Finding and treating cancer of the cervix

Because cancer of the cervix can be cured if found early, but does not have early warning signs, it is good to test for it regularly. There are 3 screening tests that look for early signs of cervical cancer. Each test is done during a pelvic exam and requires touching the cervix with a cotton swab or small brush. This is not painful.

Visual inspection with acetic acid

A health worker examines the cervix by looking at it through the speculum (see page 536). Then she puts vinegar (acetic acid) on a cotton swab and wipes it on the cervix. The acetic acid will make any abnormal tissue turn white. This test gives you the result right away and you can often receive treatment the same day. It is low cost and easy to learn how to do.

The Pap test

For this test, a health worker gently takes some cells from the cervix and sends them to a laboratory to be examined with a microscope. This test looks for abnormal cells that may be cancer or pre-cancer. You will need to return in 2 to 3 weeks to get the results.

HPV test

Like the Pap test, a health worker takes some cells from the cervix and sends them to a laboratory to be examined for the HPV virus. It does not tell if you have abnormal cells and need treatment. You will need to return in 2 to 3 weeks to get the results. If the test is positive and shows you have HPV, it does not mean that you have cancer. You will still need a Pap test or visual inspection.

Other tests

These tests are sometimes used to find cancer when a Pap test or visual inspection show abnormal cells.

- **Colposcopy.** A doctor uses a special lens to magnify the cervix so it is easier to see signs of cancer.
- **Biopsy.** A small bit of tissue is taken from the cervix and sent to a laboratory to be examined for cancer cells.

How often women should be tested

To find cancer of the cervix early enough to treat it simply and successfully, women should be tested every 3 to 5 years, starting at about age 30, **or**

- 1 year after a positive HPV test with a negative Pap test or visual inspection to make sure there is no cancer.
- 1 year after a Pap test that shows some abnormal cells to make sure those cells have not become cancer.
- 1 year after treatment for pre-cancer to make sure the cancer is gone.

Treatment:

If a screening test shows that you have pre-cancer or cancer, you need treatment. Treatment for pre-cancer is simple, using methods that remove or destroy the abnormal tissue. A method called *cryotherapy*, which can be done in a small clinic, freezes the cervix and kills the pre-cancer. Other methods remove part of the cervix with surgery (cone biopsy or LEEP – Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure).

When cancer is found and treated before it spreads, it can be cured. If the cancer is on the cervix, you may need a hysterectomy (removal of the womb, including the cervix).

If the cancer is found late and has spread beyond the cervix to other parts of the body, you may need surgery to remove the cervix, womb, parts of the vagina, and other parts that the cancer may have reached. Radiation therapy is very effective at curing cervical cancer if it has not spread too far.

Deaths from cancer of the cervix can be prevented

To reduce the risks for cancer of the cervix by finding and treating more cancers early, we can:

- learn what increases a woman's risk, and work together on finding ways to reduce these risks. It is especially important for girls to be able to wait until they are grown women before having sex. All women also need to be able to protect themselves from STIs, including HIV.
- help women avoid or quit smoking tobacco.
- learn about cancer screening and work to make it more available. Finding cancer of the cervix early can save lives.

Developing screening programs may seem too costly but it is cheaper than treatment. Screening programs can help the most women while costing the least if they:

- **target older women.** Young women rarely get cancer of the cervix, and women over 35 are most at risk.
- **test as many women as possible**, even if this means testing them less often. Testing all women at risk every 5 to 10 years will find many more cancers than testing only some women more often.
- **train local health workers** in how to do visual inspection, use cryotherapy, and give Pap tests.

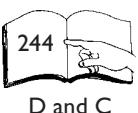
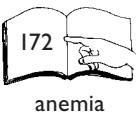
A new vaccine, called 'HPV vaccine,' to protect youth against cervical cancer has been developed and is in use in many countries. It must be given to girls before they start having sexual intercourse. See if it is available where you live.



► You may need to go to a large, special hospital for cancer treatment.



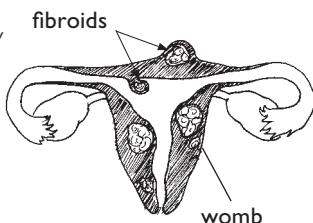
Problems of the Womb



COMMON GROWTHS OF THE WOMB

Fibroid tumors

Fibroids are growths of the womb. They can cause abnormal bleeding from the vagina, pain in the lower belly, and repeated miscarriage (losing a pregnancy). They are almost never cancer.



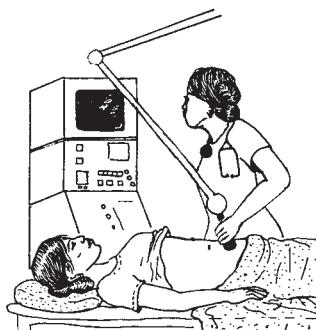
Signs:

- heavy monthly bleeding or bleeding at unusual times of the month
- pain or a heavy feeling in the lower belly
- deep pain during sex

Finding and treating fibroids

Fibroids are usually found during a pelvic exam. The womb will feel too large or be the wrong shape. A test called an *ultrasound*, if it is available, can show how large the fibroids are.

If fibroids cause problems, they can be removed with surgery. Sometimes the whole womb is removed. But most of the time, surgery is not necessary because fibroids usually become smaller after menopause and stop causing problems. If *monthly bleeding* is heavy because of fibroids, *anemia* may develop. Try to eat foods rich in iron.



An ultrasound test can show how large fibroids are.

Polyps

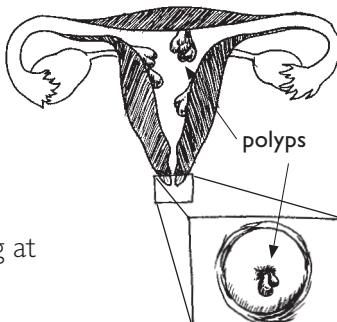
Polyps are dark red growths that can grow inside the womb or at the cervix. They are rarely cancer.

Signs:

- bleeding after sex
- heavy monthly bleeding or bleeding at unusual times of the month

Finding and treating polyps

Polyps at the cervix can be seen and removed easily and painlessly during a pelvic exam by someone who has been trained. To find polyps inside the womb, the inside of the womb must be scraped out (this is called a *D and C*). The *D and C* also removes the polyps. The growth is sent to a laboratory to make sure there is no cancer. Once polyps are removed, they usually do not grow back.



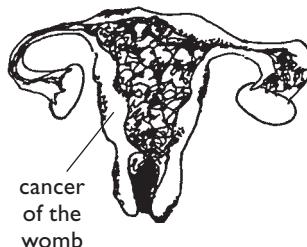
CANCER OF THE WOMB (ENDOMETRIAL CANCER, CANCER OF THE UTERUS)

Cancer of the womb usually starts in the lining inside the womb (the endometrium). If it is not treated it can spread to the womb itself and to other parts of the body. This cancer happens most often to women who:

- are over 40 years old, especially if they have gone through menopause.
- are overweight.
- have diabetes.
- have taken the hormone estrogen without also taking progesterone.

Signs:

- heavy monthly bleeding
- irregular monthly bleeding, or bleeding at unusual times of the month
- bleeding after menopause



IMPORTANT If you have any bleeding at all, even light spotting, after you have finished menopause (12 months without monthly bleeding), get checked by a health worker to make sure you do not have cancer.

Finding and treating cancer of the womb

To find out if a woman has cancer of the womb, a trained health worker must scrape out the inside of the womb with a D and C, or do a biopsy, and send the tissue to a laboratory to be checked for cancer. If cancer is found, it must be treated as soon as possible with an operation to remove the womb (hysterectomy). Radiation therapy may also be used.



Hysterectomy

In a hysterectomy, sometimes only the womb is removed and sometimes the tubes and ovaries are also removed. Since your ovaries make hormones that help protect you against heart disease and weak bones, it is always better to leave them in, if possible. Talk to a doctor about this.

If cancer of the womb is found early, it can be cured. If it is more advanced, curing it is more difficult.

IMPORTANT Any woman who is over 40 years old and has unusual bleeding should get checked by a health worker.



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heavy bleeding or
bleeding in the middle of
the month, 129

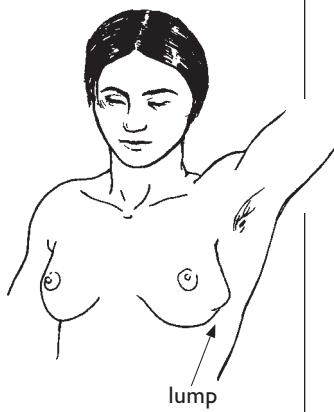
Problems of the Breasts



breast examination



breast infections



Breast lumps

Breast lumps are very common in most women, especially soft, fluid-filled ones (called cysts). These usually change during a woman's monthly cycle, and sometimes feel sore or painful when pressed. **Few breast lumps are cancer.** But since breast cancer is always a possibility, a woman should try to examine her breasts for lumps once a month (see 'warning signs' below).



Discharge from the nipple

Milky or clear discharge from one or both nipples is usually normal if a woman has breastfed a baby within the last year. Brown, green, or bloody discharge—especially from only one nipple—could be a sign of cancer. Get checked by a health worker who can examine your breasts.



Breast infection

If a woman is breastfeeding a baby and gets a hot, red sore area on the breast, she probably has *mastitis*, or an *abscess*. This is not cancer and is easily cured. If the woman is not breastfeeding, it may be a sign of cancer.

CANCER OF THE BREAST

Breast cancer usually grows slowly. If it is found early, it can sometimes be cured. It is hard to tell who will get breast cancer. The risk might be greater for a woman whose mother or sisters have had breast cancer, or for a woman who has had cancer of the womb. Breast cancer is more common in women over age 50.

Warning signs:

- a hard painless lump with a jagged shape, that is in only one breast and does not move under the skin
 - redness, or a sore on the breast that does not heal
 - skin on the breast that is pulled in, or looks rough and pitted, like orange or lemon peel
 - a nipple that changes and becomes pulled inward
 - abnormal discharge from a nipple
 - a painless swelling under the arm that does not go away
 - pain in the breast that does not go away after 4 to 6 weeks
- For any of these signs, see a trained health worker right away.

Finding and treating breast cancer

If you examine your breasts regularly, you are likely to notice if there are any changes or if a new lump develops. A special X-ray called a mammogram can find a breast lump when it is very small and less dangerous. But mammograms are not available in many places, and they are very expensive. And it cannot tell for sure if a lump is cancer.

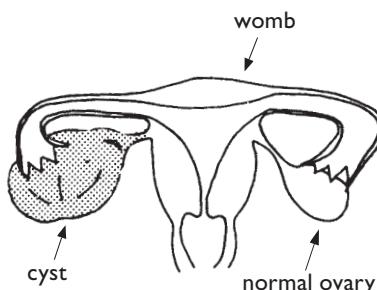
The only way to know for sure that a woman has breast cancer is with a biopsy. For this, a surgeon removes all or part of the lump with a needle or a knife and has it tested for cancer in a laboratory.

Treatment depends on how advanced the cancer is and what is available where you live. If a lump is small and found early, just removing the lump may be effective. But for some cases of breast cancer, an operation may be needed to remove the whole breast. Sometimes doctors also use medicines and radiation therapy.

No one knows yet how to prevent breast cancer. But we do know that finding and treating breast cancer early makes a cure more likely. For some women it never comes back. In other women, the cancer may come back years later. It may come back in the other breast or, less often, in other parts of the body.

Cysts on the ovaries

These cysts are fluid-filled sacks that women can get on their ovaries. They happen only during the reproductive years, between puberty and menopause. A cyst can cause pain on one side of the lower abdomen and irregular monthly bleeding. But most women only find out they have a cyst if a health worker feels one during a pelvic examination.



Most cysts last only a few months and go away on their own. But some can grow very large and must be removed by surgery. If you have severe pain, see a health worker right away.

Cancer of the ovaries

Cancer of the ovaries is not common. There are usually no warning signs, but a health worker might feel an ovary that is very large while doing a pelvic examination. Surgery, medicines, and radiation therapy are all used for treatment, and cure is very difficult.



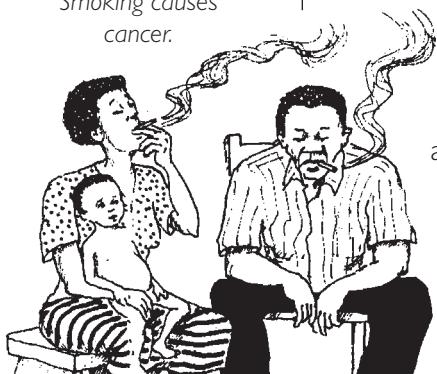
► See a health worker right away if you have already had breast cancer and find another lump in the breast or notice other warning signs of cancer.

Problems of the Ovaries



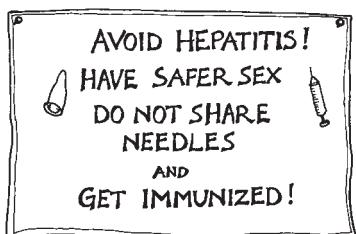
Other Common Cancers

Smoking causes cancer.

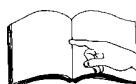


- The signs of lung cancer are the same as tuberculosis (TB). Seek medical help if you have these signs.

Cancer of the liver can be caused by hepatitis B and C.



- Try to make hepatitis B vaccine available in your community.



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hepatitis B, 277

LUNG CANCER

Lung cancer is caused by smoking tobacco. It is more common in men because they smoke more than women. But as more women smoke, they are starting to get more lung cancer. In some countries, more women die from lung cancer than from any other kind of cancer. And in many places, girls are starting to smoke as early and as much as boys. As more girls and women smoke, even more women will end up getting lung cancer.

Lung cancer does not usually affect people until they are over 40 years old. If a woman stops smoking, her risk of getting lung cancer becomes much less. The signs (coughing up blood, losing weight, difficulty breathing) appear when the cancer is advanced and difficult to cure. Surgery to remove part of the lung, medicines, and radiation therapy are all used to treat lung cancer.

MOUTH AND THROAT CANCER

Mouth and throat cancer can be caused by smoking, chewing tobacco, and some types of human papilloma virus (HPV). If you have hoarseness, pain when swallowing, or a sore throat or sores in your mouth that do not heal, get medical advice.

CANCER OF THE LIVER

Some people who become infected with hepatitis B or C develop cancer of the liver years later. Signs of liver cancer are a swollen abdomen and general weakness. See a health worker if you think you may have liver cancer.

Hepatitis B and C can be prevented by having safer sex and not sharing needles. Also, there is a vaccine for hepatitis B. Babies can be vaccinated at birth. Adults can be vaccinated at any time.

CANCER OF THE STOMACH

Cancer of the stomach usually occurs in women and men over age 40. Usually there are no signs until it is advanced. Surgery, radiation, and strong medicine are the only treatments and may not be successful.

Sometimes, however, cancer of the stomach is caused by a bacteria (*H. pylori*). This bacteria can be treated with medicine, and the treatment can prevent cancer before it starts. The signs are similar to indigestion or heartburn. If you get these signs often, or for a long time, talk with a health worker about getting tested and treated.

Many cancers can be cured, but others cannot, especially if the cancer has spread to several parts of the body. Also, hospitals that treat cancer are often far away, in large cities, and treatment is costly.

Sometimes, when cancer is found late, there is no cure. Then it may be best to stay at home in the care of your family. This time can be very difficult. Eat as well as you can and get enough rest. Medicines for pain, anxiety, and sleeping problems can make you more comfortable (see page 482). Talking with someone close to you can help you prepare for death, and help you plan for your family's future after you are gone.

When Cancer Cannot Be Cured



If you are caring for someone who must stay in bed, or who is near death, see the information on the following pages: 142, 143, 306, 308, 309, and 372.

Many unnecessary deaths from cancer could be prevented if more cancers were found and treated earlier. To help make this happen, organize women and men to promote:

- better cancer screening in local health services and rural areas.
- training for local health workers to do visual inspection for cancer of the cervix, Pap tests, and breast exams.
- health worker training and equipment to do cryotherapy.
- better education and more community awareness about how cancer can be prevented, who is at risk, what the warning signs are, and the benefits of cancer screening.
- cheap HPV tests, and lower cost care for women who have cancer.

It is also important for women to:

- learn to do breast self-examinations.
- know the signs of cancer, especially cancer of the womb, breast, and cervix.

When people in the community know more about the things that are likely to cause cancer, they may be better able to avoid them. This could prevent many cancers from starting. Help people in your community learn that they can prevent many unnecessary deaths from cancer if they avoid smoking or chewing tobacco, and if women are able to protect themselves from STIs.

Working for Change