What are vaginal and vulvar cancers?

Cancer is a disease in which cells in the body grow out of control. Cancer is always named for the part of the body where it starts, even if it spreads to other body parts later.

When cancer starts in the vagina, it is called vaginal cancer. The vagina, also called the birth canal, is the hollow, tube-like channel between the bottom of the uterus and the outside of the body.

When cancer forms in the vulva, it is vulvar cancer. The vulva is the outer part of the female genital organs. It has two folds of skin, called the labia. Vulvar cancer most often occurs on the inner edges of the labia.

When vaginal and vulvar cancers are found early, treatment is most effective.

Are there tests that can find vaginal and vulvar cancers early?

The best ways to find vaginal and vulvar cancers early are to get regular checkups and to see a doctor if you have any signs or symptoms, such as lumps or changes in the vagina or vulva. The doctor may perform tests or other procedures to find out what is causing these symptoms.

Your doctor also may recommend more follow-up tests or more frequent exams to check for vaginal or vulvar cancers if you have had abnormal Pap test results or a history of cervical cancer. These things may place you at a higher risk of getting HPV-associated cancers, like vaginal, vulvar, and cervical cancers.

It is important to note that the Pap test does not screen for vaginal and vulvar cancers. The only cancer the Pap test screens for is cervical cancer.

Who gets vaginal and vulvar cancers?

While all women are at risk for these cancers, few will get them. Vaginal and vulvar cancers are very rare. Together, they account for 6-7 percent of all gynecologic cancers diagnosed in the U.S., with an estimated 1,300 women diagnosed with vaginal cancer and 4,900 women with vulvar cancer each year.

Inside Knowledge is an initiative that supports the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act of 2005, or Johanna’s Law, which was unanimously passed by the U.S. House and Senate in December of 2006, and signed into law in January 2007.
Can the HPV vaccine prevent vaginal and vulvar cancers?

Many vaginal and vulvar cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that is passed from one person to another during sex. There is a vaccine that protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. It is recommended for preteens (both boys and girls) aged 11 to 12 years, but can be given as early as age 9 and until age 26. The vaccine is given in a series of either two or three shots, depending on age. If you or someone you care about is in this age range, talk with a doctor or other health professional about it.

To learn more about the HPV vaccine visit www.cdc.gov/hpv/index.html.

If one or more of these things is true for you, it does not mean you will get vaginal or vulvar cancer. But you should speak with your doctor to see if he or she recommends more frequent exams.

How can I prevent vaginal and vulvar cancers?

• Get the HPV vaccine. It protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. If you are between the ages of 9 and 26, talk to your doctor about the HPV vaccine.

• Take steps to reduce your risk of getting HPV or HIV, such as avoiding sex or limiting your number of sexual partners.

• Don’t smoke.

What should I do if my doctor says I have vaginal or vulvar cancer?

If your doctor says that you have vaginal or vulvar cancer, ask to be referred to a gynecologic oncologist—a doctor who has been trained to treat cancers like these. This doctor will work with you to create a treatment plan.

Where can I find more information about vaginal, vulvar, and other gynecologic cancers?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/cancer/gynecologic

National Cancer Institute: 800-4-CANCER or www.cancer.gov