

**What Women Need to Know About Cervical Cancer**

With January being Cervical Cancer Awareness Month, we asked Dr. Kathe Miller, a board certified family medicine doctor and women’s health expert, what women need to know about cervical cancer testing and prevention.

While a cancer diagnosis is scary for women at any age, cervical cancer is particularly hard for us as physicians because we know it is preventable. It is also a problem that often affects young women, unlike other cancers that show up later in life.

Years ago, cervical cancer was the leading cause of cancer death among women. But thanks to regular screenings (Pap tests) and new vaccines to prevent human papillomavirus (HPV), the main cause of cervical cancer, it is now preventable and fairly rare in countries like the United States where women have access to medical care.

National guidelines recommend that women start getting Pap tests at age 21, and that between the ages of 21-30 women have this test every three years. Between 30 and 65, women should have a Pap test along with an HPV test (a virus that can cause cervical cancer) every five years. While most of us women do not look forward to getting our Pap smears, they are not painful and are very effective in preventing cancer! Simply put, the Pap test looks for changes on the cervix that could turn into cancer if left untreated. The HPV test looks for the virus that causes these changes. If we see any of these early changes, we can treat them right away, and prevent them from turning into cancer later on.

As a family medicine doctor at the [CHA Windsor Street Care Center](https://gcptest.challiance.org/locations/cambridge/cha-windsor-street-care-center?Token=19c01e86-3442-4f03-ab4a-7dfc1d57b1fe&LastVisitedCMSAdminPageUrl=https%3a%2f%2fgcptest.challiance.org%2fAdmin%2fpage-landing) in Cambridge, many of my patients ask me “do I REALLY need to get a Pap test?” What I tell them is that this is one thing you can do for your health that will make a tremendous difference. We are always happy to see you, and the tests are quick, they won’t hurt and they just might save your life.

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