

# Breaking

## The Silence:

Awareness,  
Self-Advocacy, and  
Cervical Cancer



**SHARE**  
CANCER SUPPORT

# What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer begins in the cervix, which is the bottom part of the uterus (womb). Cervical cancer usually develops slowly over time. Long-term infection with high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer. When high-risk HPV infections persist (do not go away over time), this can cause normal cervical cells to change and become abnormal, and they may eventually develop into cancer. That said, this abnormal tissue can be detected through screening and, therefore, removed before it has the chance to become cancer.

## Types of Cervical Cancer

There are two main types of cervical cancer, and they are named after the kind of cell that becomes cancerous.

- ***Squamous cell carcinoma*** is cervical cancer that starts in the thin, flat cells called squamous cells. The squamous cells line the outer part of the cervix. Most cervical cancers are squamous cell carcinomas.
- ***Adenocarcinoma*** is cervical cancer that begins in the column-shaped gland cells that line the cervical canal.

## Cervical Cancer Symptoms

Although it is possible not to experience any symptoms, there are signs to be on the lookout for that could be an indication of cervical cancer. Cervical cancer symptoms include:

- Vaginal bleeding after intercourse, between periods, or after menopause
- Periods that are heavier or last longer than usual
- Vaginal discharge that is watery and has a strong odor or contains blood
- Pelvic pain or pain during intercourse
- Back pain
- Losing weight without trying
- Fatigue
- Bone pain

Although these symptoms may be caused by factors other than cancer, it is important to be evaluated by a gynecologist. Listen to your body and know what is “normal” for you.

# Resources

## **SHARE Cancer Support:**

<https://www.sharecancersupport.org>

**Cervical Cancer Support Line: 332.600.1057**

**Cervical Cancer Text Line: 612.444.7325**

## **CancerCare:**

<https://www.cancerca.org/>

## **Cervivor:**

<https://cervivor.org/>

## **Foundation for Women's Cancer:**

<https://foundationforwomenscancer.org/>

## **National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program:**

<https://www.cdc.gov/breast-cervical-cancer-screening/>

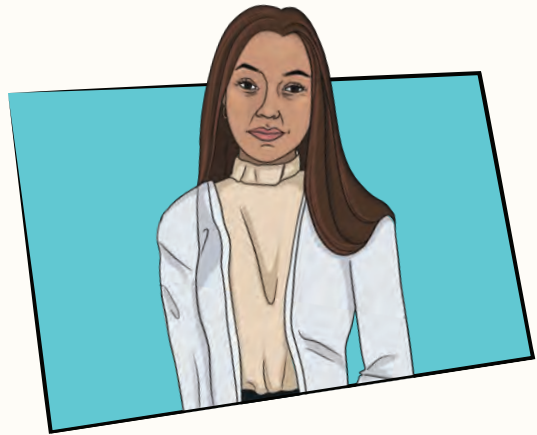
## **National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN) Guidelines for Patients:**

<https://www.nccn.org/patients/guidelines/content/PDF/cervical-patient-guideline.pdf>

## **SHARE Disclaimer:**

The stories in this free resource for the cervical cancer community are fictional. Still, they are based on medical information that has been reviewed by a medical expert and found to be factual. The information provided here is not intended to replace your doctor's medical advice.

# Consuelo...



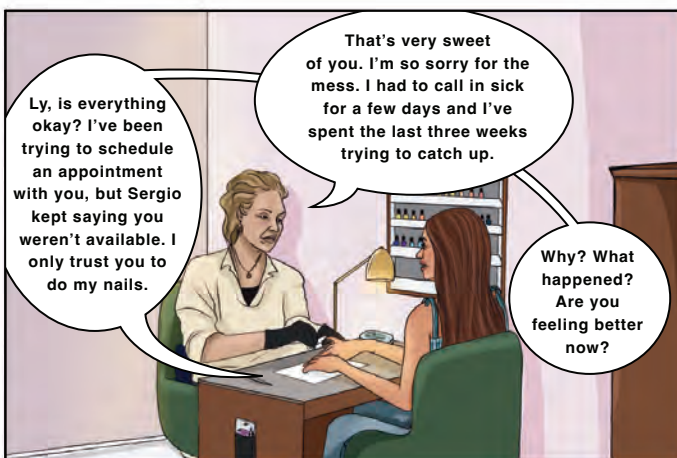
A 40-year-old Latina mother of two children, Carlos and Martha. She worries about the health of her children and questions if the HPV vaccine is the right decision as a precautionary action for the future of her kids.





It's so good to see you!

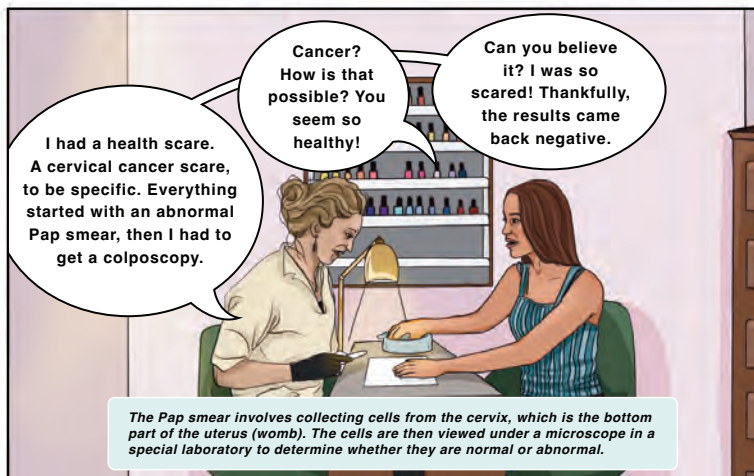
Consuelo, que gusto!



Ly, is everything okay? I've been trying to schedule an appointment with you, but Sergio kept saying you weren't available. I only trust you to do my nails.

That's very sweet of you. I'm so sorry for the mess. I had to call in sick for a few days and I've spent the last three weeks trying to catch up.

Why? What happened? Are you feeling better now?



I had a health scare. A cervical cancer scare, to be specific. Everything started with an abnormal Pap smear, then I had to get a colposcopy.

Cancer? How is that possible? You seem so healthy!

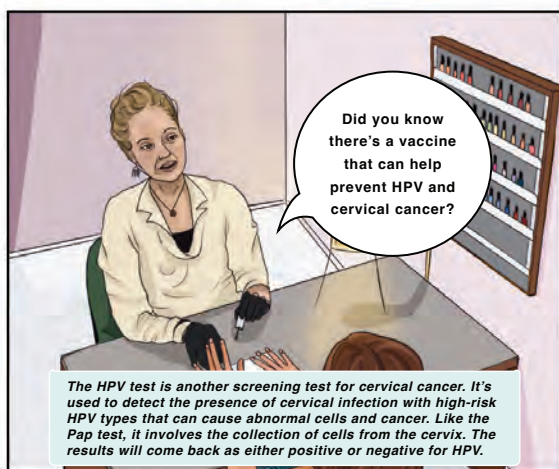
Can you believe it? I was so scared! Thankfully, the results came back negative.

*The Pap smear involves collecting cells from the cervix, which is the bottom part of the uterus (womb). The cells are then viewed under a microscope in a special laboratory to determine whether they are normal or abnormal.*



Thank you for sharing this with me, Ly. I'm so glad you're okay now.

Thank you, me too!



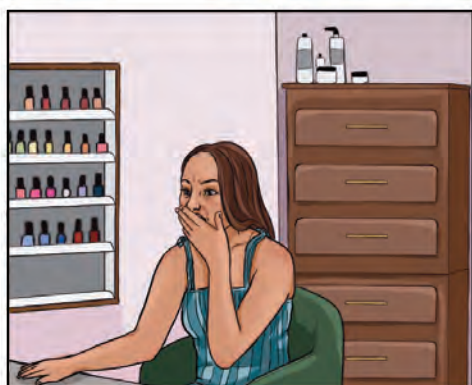
Did you know there's a vaccine that can help prevent HPV and cervical cancer?

*The HPV test is another screening test for cervical cancer. It's used to detect the presence of cervical infection with high-risk HPV types that can cause abnormal cells and cancer. Like the Pap test, it involves the collection of cells from the cervix. The results will come back as either positive or negative for HPV.*



A vaccine? I didn't know...

I didn't know either! But I wish I had. The doctor said you can get it between the ages of nine and forty-five. I don't qualify anymore, but I'm determined to tell everyone who does.



Nine years old? Isn't that too young to be thinking about HPV?

I thought so, too, but the doctor said the younger you get it, the more effective it is.



At a wedding the following night

Mamá, tell  
Carlos to stop  
stealing my  
food!

Carlos, leave  
Martha's food  
alone!

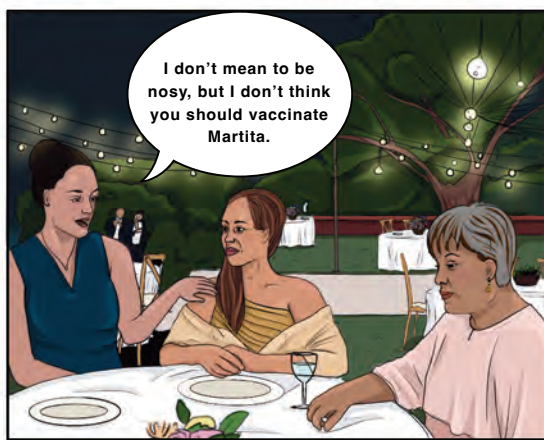
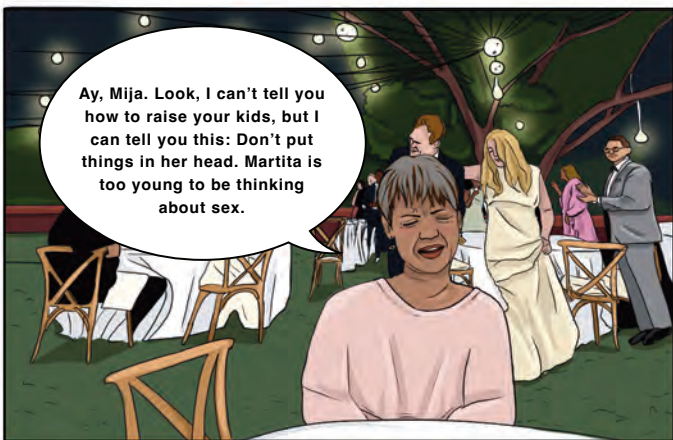
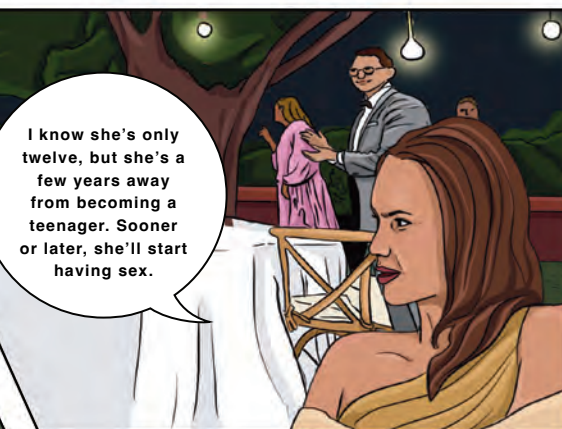
Whatever

Thank you,  
Mami.

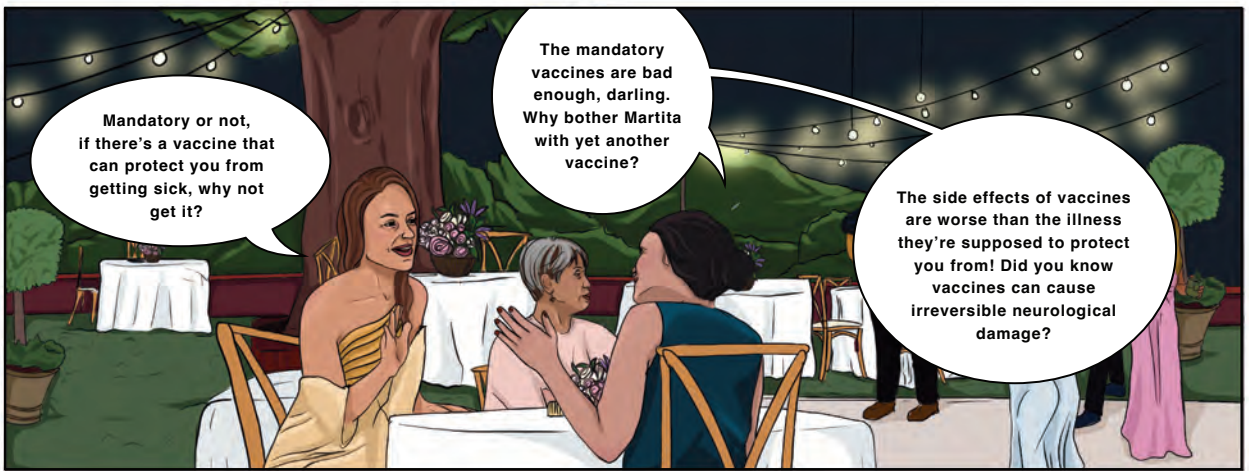
Consuelo's imagination

Martha,  
your biopsy  
results came  
back positive for  
cervical cancer.





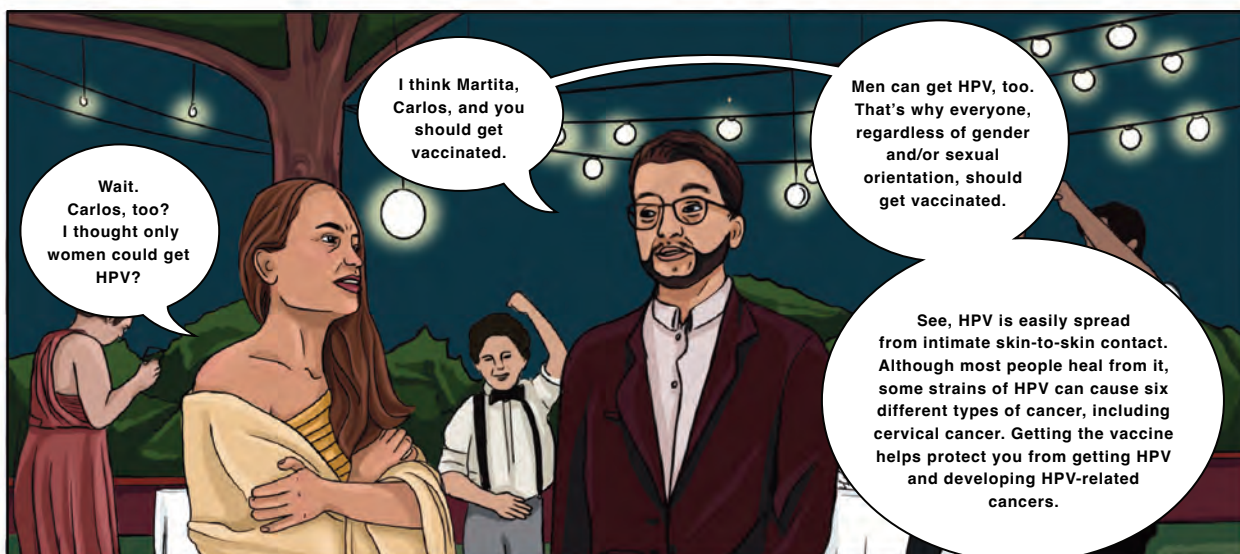
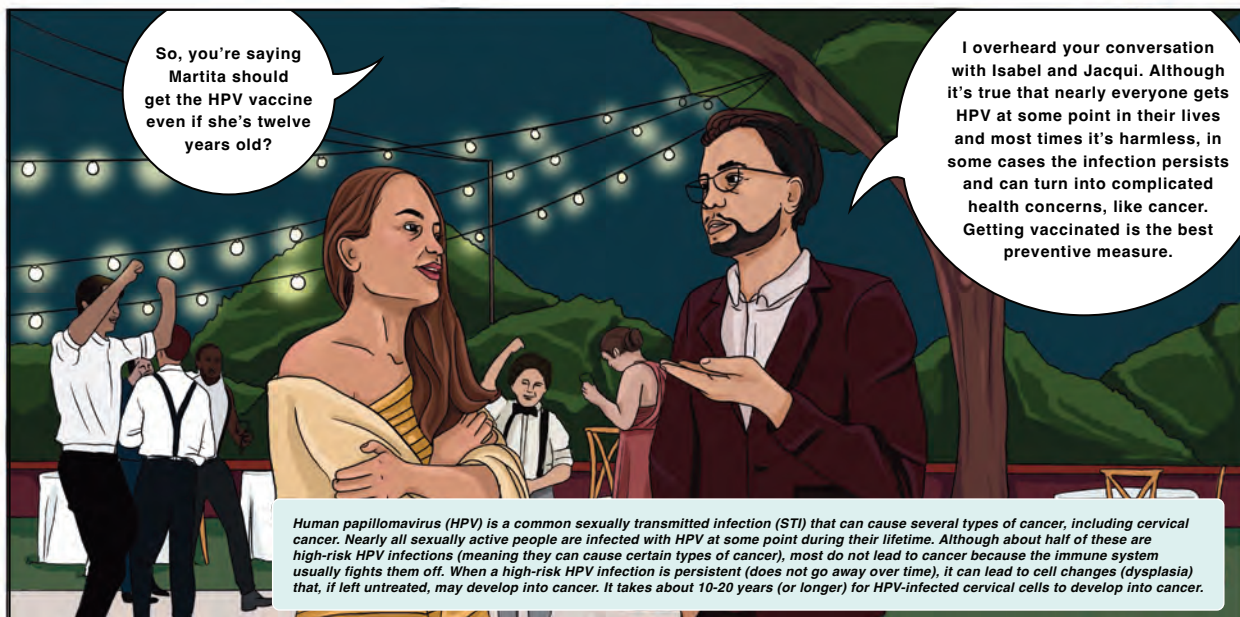














A few weeks later

The HPV vaccine protects against infection from nine HPV types, including the high-risk types that cause most HPV-related cancers, as well as those that cause the majority of genital warts. The HPV vaccine is most effective when given between the ages of 9 and 12 (for both males and females), with eligibility up until 45 years of age. It is estimated that HPV vaccination could prevent more than 90% of HPV-related cancers.

You did great! Please remember: this is your first shot, but not your last. Martha is twelve years old, so she needs one more. Carlos and Consuelo need to get two more.

You have to finish the vaccination cycle for the vaccine to be the most effective. Please don't forget.

What happens if we miss one?

Thank you for coming, and thank you for bringing the kids with you.

Thank you for explaining to me how important this is.

I like to think of it this way: our grandparents came to America to give us a better life. What better life than a healthy one?

# Ava...

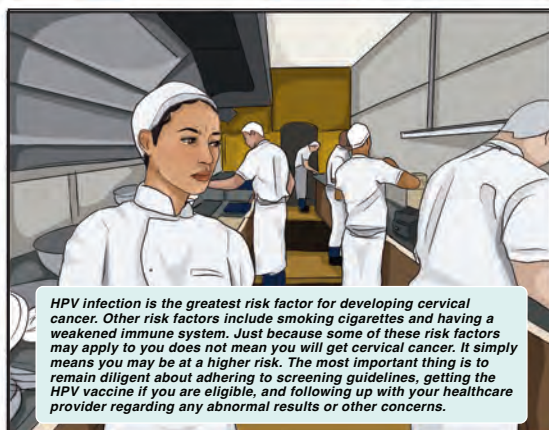
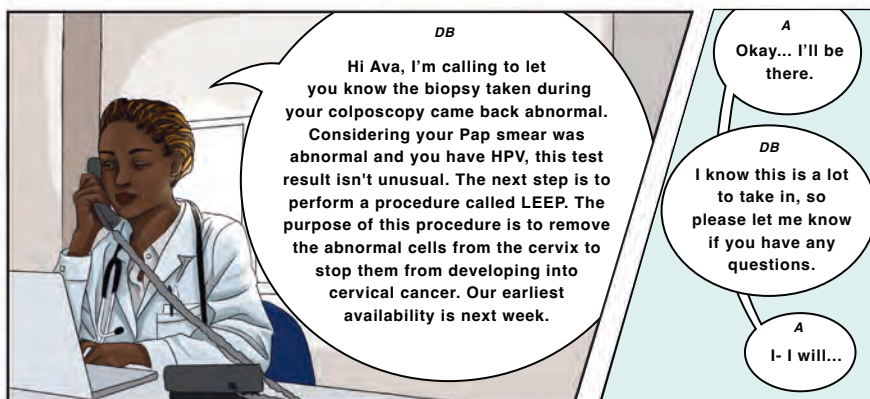
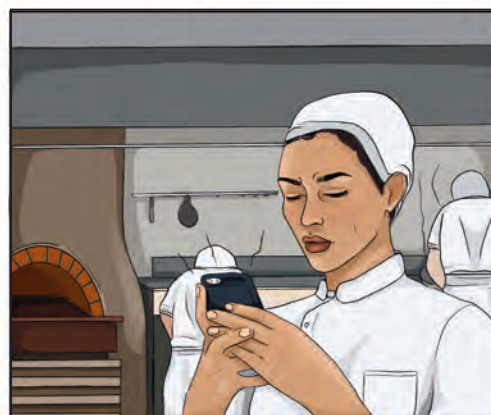
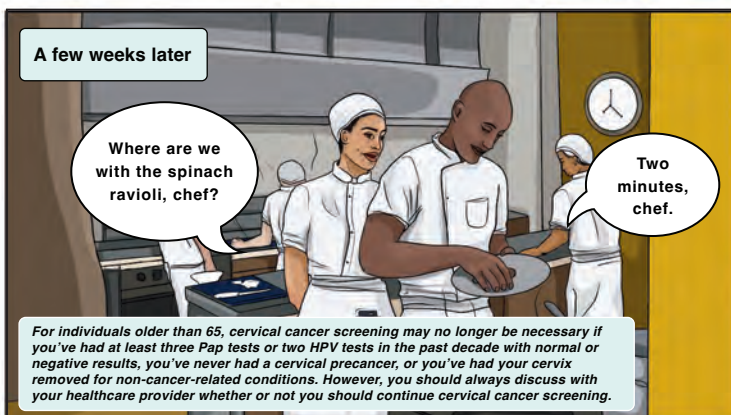


A 35-year-old sous-chef who is in a same-sex relationship with Chloe. They are planning their future together when Ava's Pap smear results come back abnormal. Ava's doctor and Chloe help her navigate through fear and the next steps.

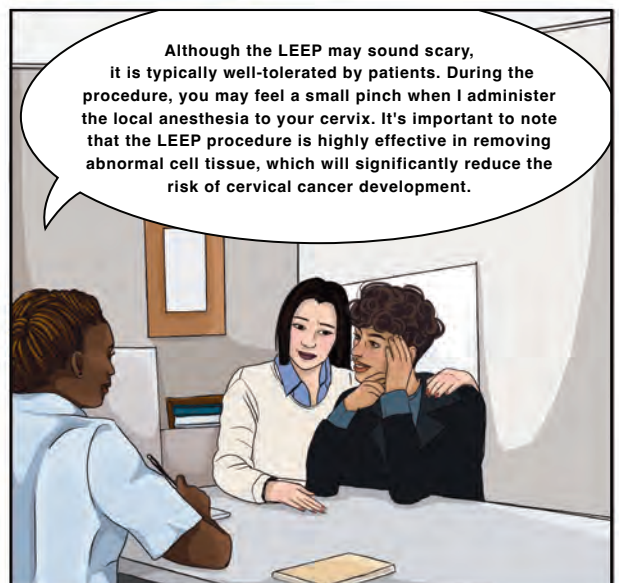
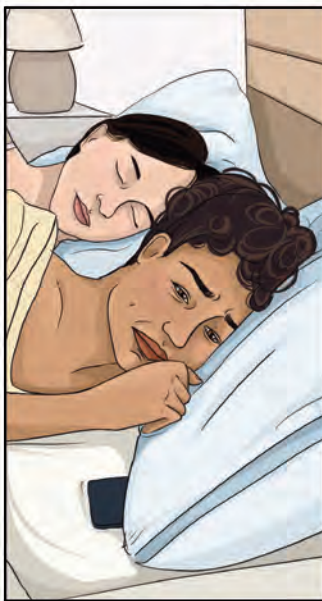




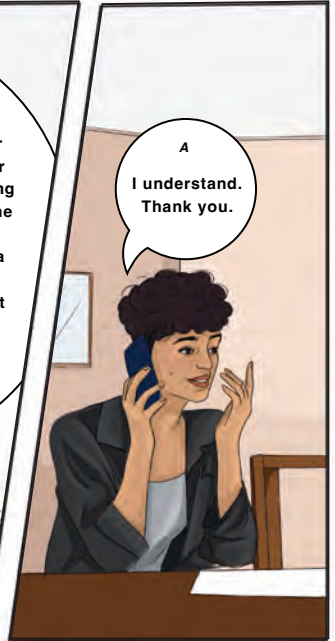
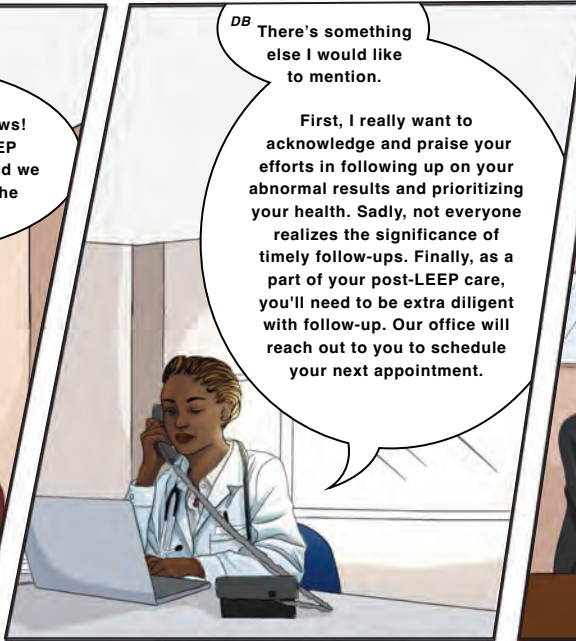
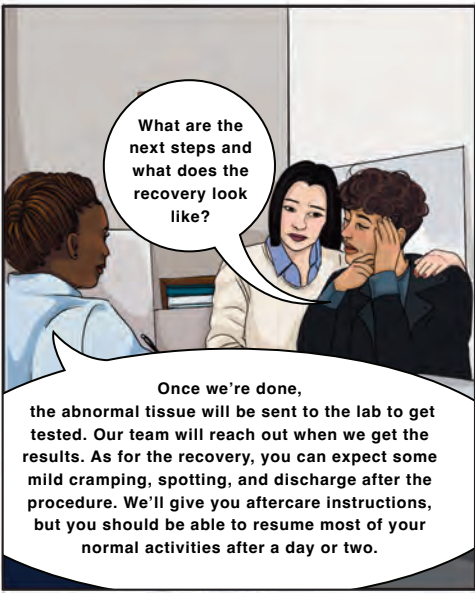














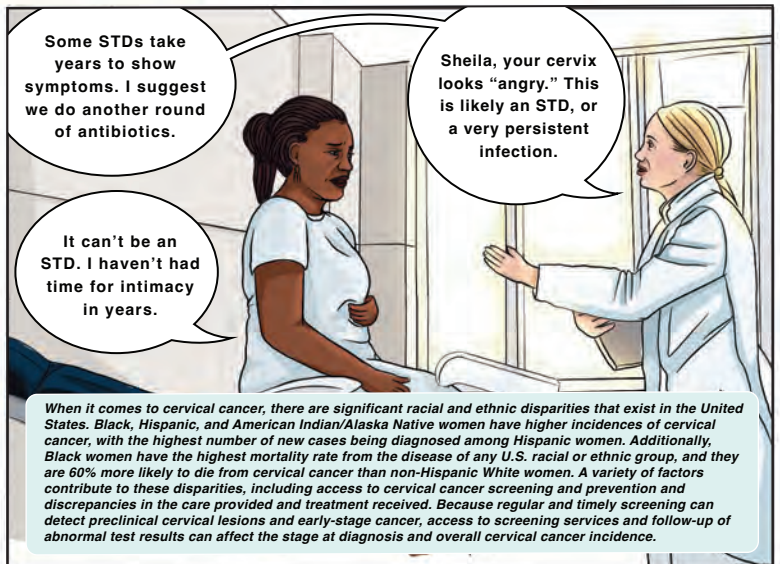
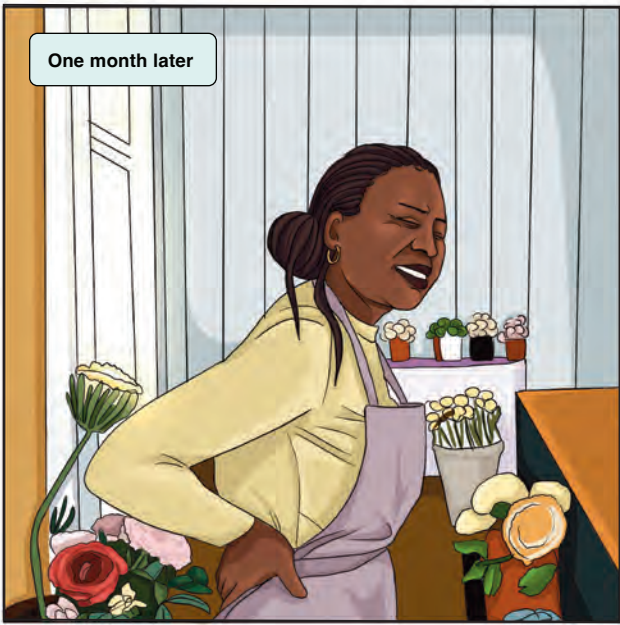
# Sheila...



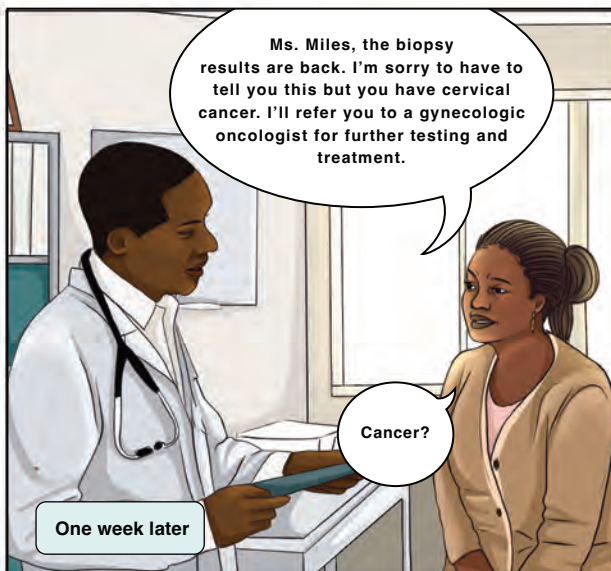
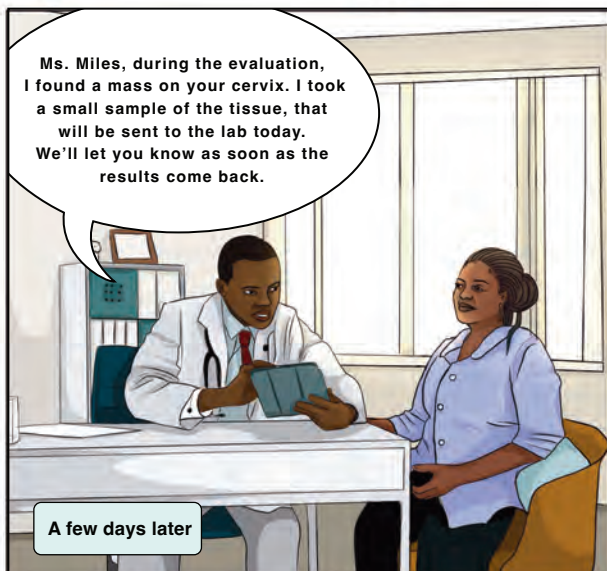
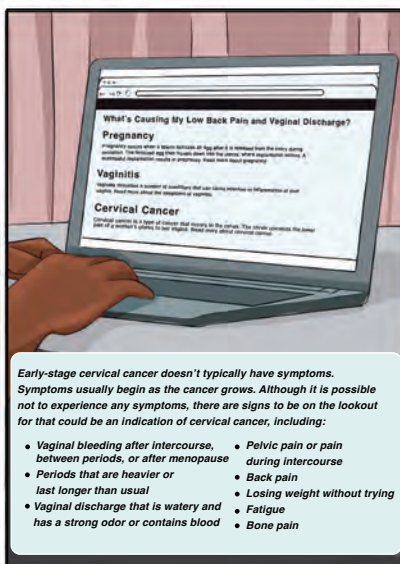
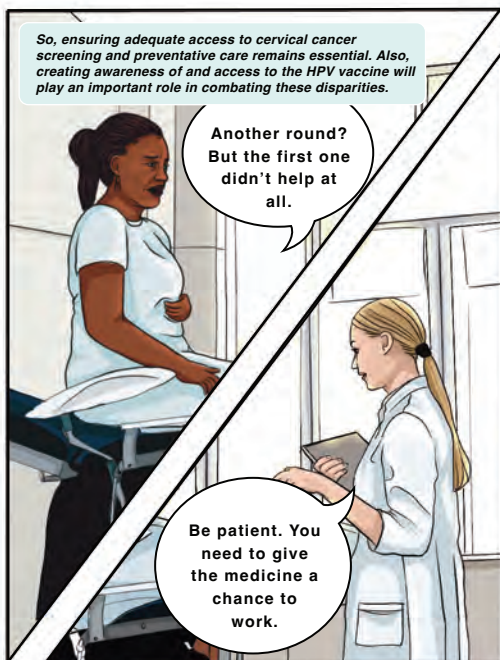
Sheila is Black, owns a flower shop, and is a mother of three: Jackson, Jenny, and Marcus. Sheila's been noticing some unusual discharge and experiencing back pain lately. But because she doesn't have health insurance, finding the help she needs is tough and takes a lot of effort.













### The following week

You'll likely need radiation five days a week plus weekly chemotherapy for the next six weeks, followed by brachytherapy, which is internal radiation. You should be able to complete treatment within eight weeks. I'm sorry to say that you may not be able to work during that time. I know you don't have insurance, but this is something we can work through. You have options.

I understand that starting treatment can be overwhelming and may come with some challenges, but I'm here to support you. The treatment has been proven to be effective. The earlier we begin, the better your chances of a successful outcome.

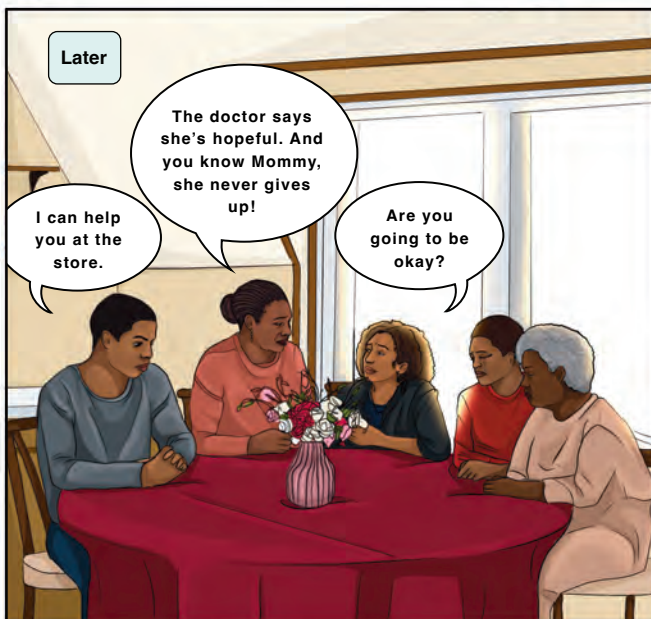
I can't stop my life for eight weeks. I just can't. Who's gonna take care of the shop, the kids, and my mom?

### Sheila receives radiation therapy

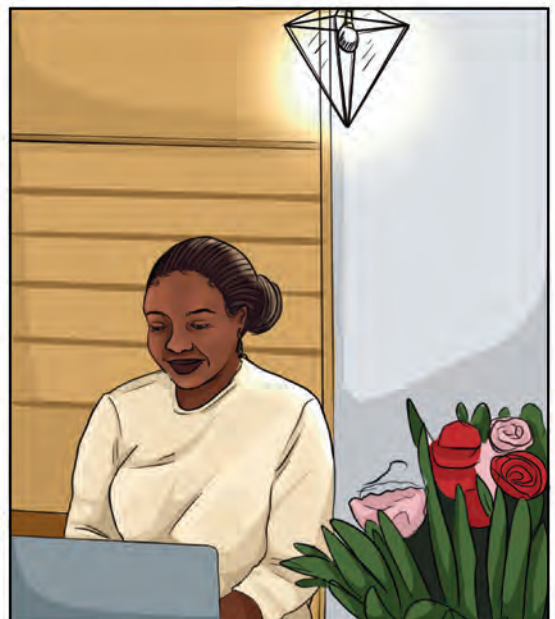
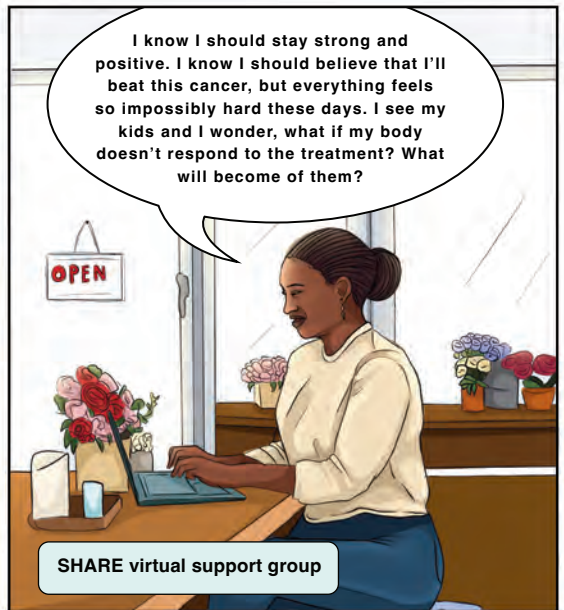
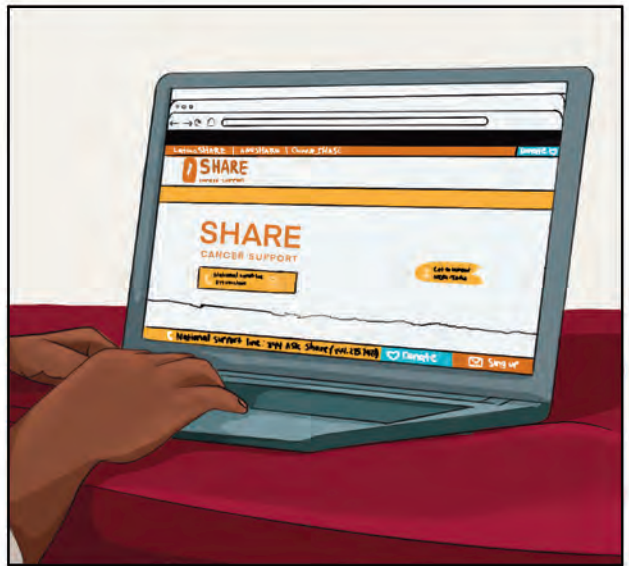
Radiation therapy is one of the primary treatments for cervical cancer. Depending on the stage of the cancer, radiation therapy may be used as part of the main treatment or to treat cervical cancer that has spread or come back following treatment. For some stages, the preferred treatment is radiation alone or surgery followed by radiation. For other stages of cervical cancer, radiation and chemotherapy are given together, which is called concurrent chemoradiation.

The types of radiation therapy that are most often used to treat cervical cancer are external beam radiation and brachytherapy. As with other cancer treatments, radiation therapy may result in short and long-term side effects, so you should talk to your healthcare provider about ways to manage them. Because pelvic radiation can damage the ovaries, it sometimes causes early menopause, which can be temporary or permanent. It's important to discuss fertility concerns with your healthcare provider before treatment.

### Sheila receives chemotherapy











# Glossary

## **Abnormal Pap Smear**

An abnormal Pap smear result means cells that appear unusual were found on the cervix. This is usually not cervical cancer, especially for individuals who have received routine cervical cancer screening. Abnormal results can also be caused by cell changes (dysplasia), infection, and inflammation, among other things. Depending on the situation, the healthcare provider will recommend monitoring, additional testing, or treatment.

## **Biopsy**

A biopsy is a procedure that removes a small piece of tissue or a sample of cells from the body for examination to discover the presence, cause, or extent of a disease.

## **Brachytherapy**

Brachytherapy, also called internal radiation, is a procedure used to treat certain types of cancer and other conditions. It involves placing the radiation source inside the body.

## **Cervical Dysplasia**

Cervical dysplasia refers to abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. These changes are not cancerous, but they can lead to cervical cancer if they are not treated.

## **Chemotherapy**

Chemotherapy is a treatment that attacks all cancer cells in the hope of reducing the growth of rapidly dividing cancer cells or killing cancer cells. Chemotherapy can be prescribed alone or in combination with other treatments.

## **Colposcopy**

A colposcopy is a diagnostic procedure that allows the cervix, vagina, and vulva to be closely examined for abnormal tissue. During a colposcopy, the healthcare provider uses a special instrument called a colposcope.

## **External Beam Radiation**

External beam radiation is radiation therapy delivered from an instrument outside of the body to the region of the body with the tumor with the goal of sparing normal tissue.

## **Gynecologist**

A gynecologist is a doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating conditions of the female reproductive system. They also provide routine and preventive care, such as screenings for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and breast exams.

## **Gynecologic Oncologist**

A gynecologic oncologist is a doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating cancers of the female reproductive system.

## **HPV-Related Cancers**

HPV can cause six types of cancer. Aside from cervical cancer, these include anal cancer, oropharyngeal cancer, penile cancer, vaginal cancer, and vulvar cancer.

## **HPV Test**

The HPV test is used to detect the presence of cervical infection with high-risk HPV types that can cause abnormal cells and cancer. Like the Pap smear, it involves the collection of cells from the cervix. The results will come back as either positive or negative for high-risk HPV.

## **Human Papillomavirus (HPV)**

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI), and it is typically spread through intimate skin-to-skin contact. There are over 200 types, or strains, of HPV. The strains can be divided into two categories of HPV: low-risk and high-risk. Low-risk HPV is rarely associated with cancer, but some can cause issues like genital warts. High-risk HPV can cause certain types of cancer, such as cervical, oropharyngeal, and anal cancers. Out of the 14 high-risk strains of HPV, two types (HPV16 and HPV18) are responsible for most HPV-related cancers.

## **Hysterectomy**

A hysterectomy is a surgical procedure that removes the uterus. After a hysterectomy, a person cannot become pregnant and no longer menstruates.

## **LEEP**

LEEP stands for loop electrosurgical excision procedure. During a LEEP, a heated thin wire loop is used to remove abnormal tissue from the cervix. The tissue is then sent to a lab for further testing.

## **Pap Smear**

A Pap smear (or Pap test) is most commonly used to screen for cervical cancer. The Pap smear involves collecting cells from the cervix, which is the bottom part of the uterus (womb). The cells are then viewed under a microscope to determine whether they are normal or abnormal. Finding cervical cancer early with a Pap smear means a greater chance for a cure. A Pap smear can also detect changes in cervical cells that suggest cancer may develop in the future. Finding these abnormal cells early with a Pap smear is the first step in stopping the possible future development of cervical cancer.

## **Transvaginal Ultrasound**

A transvaginal ultrasound is a test where the ultrasound probe is inserted into the vagina to view the uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes, cervix, and pelvic area.



# Welcome to SHARE!

*If you've been recently diagnosed with cervical cancer or if you're a survivor, we're here to help you.*

## **Cervical Cancer Support Line: 332.600.1057**

Call SHARE's cervical cancer support line and speak with a survivor or caregiver who's been there. We can answer your questions, discuss treatments, help you sort through your options, and make informed decisions. We can connect you with a peer whose situation is similar to yours, or we can just listen. If you prefer, you can reach us via email at [helpline@sharecancersupport.org](mailto:helpline@sharecancersupport.org).

## **Cervical Cancer Text Line: 612.444.7325**

Text us! Sometimes, it can be easier to write down your questions or feelings. SHARE's cervical program is now here to support you via text! You can reach our cervical cancer text line between the hours of 10am-4pm Monday through Friday at 612.444.7325. If you ever need support outside of those hours, we're still here for you. You can always call our Helpline at 332.600.1057, and someone will get back to you shortly.

## **Cervical Cancer Educational Programs & Webinars**

SHARE's educational programs are designed to give you the information you need to understand your diagnosis and treatment options and ask questions. Experts in cervical cancer treatment, research, wellness, and mental health share their knowledge and address your concerns.

## **Cervical Cancer Support Groups**

Share your thoughts and feelings in support groups led by specially trained facilitators who have personal experience with cervical cancer. No matter what phase you are in your cervical cancer journey, we support each other and share tips, laughter, and tears.

For more information about everything SHARE can do for you, visit [www.sharecancersupport.org](http://www.sharecancersupport.org)

SHARE is here for you, and all of our services are free.

# Breaking *The Silence:*

*Awareness, Self-Advocacy, and  
Cervical Cancer*

## **Credits:**

**Writer:** Giovanna Sarquís

**Illustrator:** Natalia Ramos

**Coordinators:** Maggie Nicholas-Alexander,  
Aisha McClellan, and Lisbeth Paulino

**Creator:** Ivis Sampayo

This resource was made possible through an  
independent grant from **Merck & Co., Inc.**



# MERCK

**SHARE Cancer Support** is a national nonprofit that supports, educates, and empowers anyone who has been diagnosed with breast or gynecologic cancer and provides outreach to the general public about signs and symptoms. SHARE is dedicated to serving people of all races, cultures, backgrounds, and identities. Because no one should have to face breast, ovarian, uterine (endometrial), cervical, or metastatic breast cancer alone.



# SHARE

CANCER SUPPORT