



January is Cervical Health Awareness Month

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical Cancer is a cancer that forms in tissues of the cervix (the organ connecting the uterus and vagina, also called the birth canal). It is usually a slow-growing cancer that may not have symptoms, but can be found with regular Pap tests (a procedure in which cells are scraped from the cervix and looked at under a microscope). Cervical cancer is almost always caused by human papillomavirus (HPV) infection.

Facts

- All women are at risk for cervical cancer.
- Cervical cancer occurs most often in women over thirty.
- According to the National Cancer Institute, there were 11,270 estimated new cases and 4,070 deaths from cervical cancer in the United States in 2009.
- Cervical cancer used to be the leading cause of cancer death for women in the United States. However, in the past 40 years, the number of cases and the number of deaths from cervical cancer have decreased significantly. This decline is the result of many women getting regular Pap tests.
- Cervical cancer is highly preventable in most Western countries because screening tests and a vaccine to prevent HPV infections are available.
- When cervical cancer is found early, it is highly treatable.

Symptoms

The early stages of cervical cancer often present no symptoms. When symptoms do appear, often at a more advanced stage, they tend to be overlooked because they mimic so many other ailments (abnormal bleeding, unusual heavy discharge, pelvic pain, or pain during urination). Many women pass these symptoms off as Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) or ovulation pains.

Prevention

The best way to prevent cervical cancer is for all women to have regular Pap tests. The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for pre-cancers and cell changes on the cervix that might become cervical cancer if they are not treated appropriately. Optima Adult Maintenance Guidelines recommends that women start getting regular Pap test at age 18, or earlier if sexually active, annually until three or more are normal, then every three years. HPV test looks for the virus that can cause these cell changes, and may be used for screening women over 30, or women of any age who have unclear Pap test results. The Pap test is one of the most reliable and effective cancer screening tests available.

Because cervical cancer is most commonly caused by HPV infection, an important part of cervical cancer prevention is HPV prevention. HPV is a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. At least half of sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives, but the risk of getting cervical cancer will decrease with regular Pap tests. Prevention of HPV infection include:

- Avoiding sexual activity if you are at risk of infection,
- Using barrier protection or spermicidal gels, and/or
- Getting an HPV vaccine.

The HPV vaccine protects against the types of HPV that most often cause cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers, and is given in a series of three shots. The vaccine is recommended for girls 11 to 12 years old. It also can be given to females 13–26 who did not get any or all of the shots when they were younger. The vaccine does not protect women who are already infected with HPV.