

## DISEASE AWARENESS

JANUARY 2013 • MEMBERS

# Cervical Cancer

## Prevention is now possible

Cervical cancer isn't one of the top 10 cancers. Yet it still claims the lives of over 4,000 women each year.<sup>1</sup> And, that's 4,000 women too many because we *can prevent cervical cancer death*.

Cervical cancer is a cancer of the lower part of the uterus or womb. It's caused by HPV, a sexually-transmitted virus. Most HPV infections clear up on their own, especially in women <30 years of age. But the infections that don't go away can cause cervical cancer in some women. About 12,000 women are affected annually.<sup>1</sup> HPV can also cause cancer in the vulva, vagina, anus, and mouth.

Although we don't have a treatment for HPV, we can reduce cervical cancer death by doing *all* these things:

- Practicing safe sex
- Getting vaccinated
- Following the guidelines for screening
- Reducing weight if overweight or obese
- Stopping cigarette smoking

## Practicing safe sex

Correct use of a condom every time you have sex will help lower your chances of getting HPV. But, it's not 100% effective. HPV can infect areas not covered by a condom.

Other things you can do to practice safe sex include limiting the number of people you have sex with and choosing a partner who has had either no or only a few other sex partners.



## HPV testing—a part of cervical cancer screening

There are 2 different types of HPV tests:

- HPV high-risk DNA test
- HPV E6/E7 mRNA test

Both of these tests detect HPV infections that can cause cancer in some women. E6/E7 mRNA is related to substances involved in cervical cancer development. Some studies have shown that the E6/E7 mRNA test might be more specific. This could decrease the number of unnecessary follow-up procedures.

### Getting vaccinated

HPV vaccines have been available for 6 years now. Here's what you need to know about them:

- The vaccine is for people of both sexes. Of course, males don't get cervical cancer, but they should be vaccinated anyway. Vaccination helps decrease the spread of the virus to females and protects against anal cancer.
- Boys and girls should get vaccinated when they are 11 or 12 years old. The vaccine works better before contact with HPV. Usually 11- or 12-year-olds haven't had contact with HPV yet, because they haven't had sex. So, it's a good time to be vaccinated.
- The vaccine can also be given to people of other ages. The acceptable age range is 9 to 26 years.
- The vaccine is for people of all sexual orientations.
- The vaccines are given in a series of 3 shots spread out over 6 months. You need to get all 3 shots to get the most protection.
- Vaccination does not guarantee you won't get cervical cancer. This is because the vaccines target only 2 types of high-risk HPV. These are the types that cause 70% of cervical cancers. But, there are other types that cause cervical cancer too. The vaccine doesn't protect against them.
- One of the vaccines also protects against HPV types 6 and 11. These types are the most common causes of genital warts.

### Following the guidelines for screening

Cervical cancer screening saves lives. It can detect cancer early and can even detect abnormal cells before they become cancerous. Screening is for all women aged 21 to 65 years old and for some older women. It should be done every 3 to 5 years. The actual recommendations depend on your age:

- <21 years of age: no screening
- 21–29 years of age: Pap test every 3 years
- 30–65 years of age: Pap + HPV every 5 years (preferred) or Pap test every 3 years
- >65 years of age: no screening if low cancer risk

These recommendations might change if you have a positive screen. In that case, your doctor will either screen you more often or will do follow-up tests right away. Then, future screening will depend on the follow-up test results. To protect yourself, be sure to follow your doctor's guidance.

### More about cervical cancer screening

Cervical cancer screening has been around for a long time. You probably know it as the Pap test. The Pap test can detect cervical cancer. It can also detect abnormal cells that might develop into cancer. In the early stages, doctors can surgically remove both the cancer cells and the precancer cells. Removing precancer cells prevents cervical cancer.

The Pap test doesn't detect all cases of cervical cancer or precancer, though. That's why the HPV test is also used for cervical cancer screening. The HPV test detects HPV infections that can cause cancer in some women. The test is especially important for women 30 years of age and older. This may be because it's harder for them to clear the infection on their own. The infection lasts longer and there is a greater chance of cancer than in younger women. If HPV is detected, your doctor can screen you more often or do follow-up testing now.

## How to pay for vaccination and screening

We can greatly decrease the number of women who get cervical cancer. But to do that, we have to make sure people get vaccinated and screened. You may be able to get these services at no cost. Here's how:

- **Private insurance:** most insurance companies will pay for the vaccine, Pap test, and HPV test at no charge to the patient (no copay, coinsurance, or deductible). This is because they are preventive services covered under the Affordable Care Act.
- **Vaccines for Children (VFC):** this program gives vaccines at no cost to doctors who serve Medicaid-eligible and other eligible children.
- **National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP):** this program provides access to cervical cancer screening (Pap test) and diagnostic services to low-income, uninsured, and underserved women.
- **Medicare Part B:** this insurance covers Pap tests every 24 months for all women and every 12 months for those at high risk.

Other parts of the Affordable Care Act will also improve access to these services:

- Everyone will be required to have health insurance.
- There will be a sliding scale to minimize cost of insurance for those in financial need.
- Young people up to age 26 can be covered under their parent's insurance plan.

Some insurance companies will also pay for the doctor's visit if you get the vaccine or screen as part of an annual preventive care visit. Check with your insurance company to find out exactly what is covered under your plan.

## References

1. American Cancer Society. Cancer Facts and Figures 2012. <http://www.cancer.org/acs/groups/content/@epidemiologysurveillance/documents/document/acspc-031941.pdf>. Accessed December 13, 2012.