Cervical Good Health

Cervical cancer is a success story in the history of cancer control. Since Pap tests were introduced over 50 years ago, deaths from cervical cancer have declined 75%. Still, 4,000 women die each year from this disease.

Recently, a vaccine was developed which actually prevents many kinds of cervical cancer. This vaccine targets various strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted infection. It should be given before an HPV infection can occur and is routinely recommended for girls ages 11 and 12.

Almost all women have an HPV infection at some point. Usually, it causes no symptoms or health problems and goes away on its own when a healthy immune system clears the infection. But in about 5% of the cases, cervical cancer does begin. The new vaccine targets many of those cases.

Although the vaccine can prevent up to 70% of cervical cancer cases, it can’t prevent infection from every virus that causes cervical cancer. Routine Pap tests are the most effective way to detect cervical cancer in its early stages.

Perhaps you have doubts about the HPV vaccine. To be sure this or any other medical option aligns with your personal belief system, talk with your health care provider. You can also learn additional ways to reduce the risk of cervical cancer, including the advice to avoid smoking. With a health care provider who knows you and whom you trust, you are better able to make medical decisions which are truly right for you.

What if you don’t currently have a medical home? Cervical good health may be just the impetus you need to find one.

January Is National Cervical Health Awareness Month

Prayer: Creator God, I want to be healthy. I want to be an example of good health and responsible habits to those I love. Keep me mindful of this each day. Amen.

New Guidelines for Pap Tests

Recently the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists released a new set of guidelines regarding Pap tests, the screening used to detect cervical cancer. These guidelines include changes in the ages at which to have the first and the last tests.

For younger women, the new guidelines avoid unnecessary additional procedures which may lead to anxiety, expense, and risk, such as early labor. For older women who have had three consecutive good tests and have had no poor tests for over 10 years, discontinuing screening at age 65 or 70 is reasonable because cervical cancer develops slowly and risk factors decrease with age.

Half of all invasive cervical cancer cases are found in women who have never been screened or were infrequently screened. The National Cancer Institute Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities has studied this. It believes that this disparity is one indicator that changes need to be made within the health care delivery system.

Cervical cancer disproportionately affects minorities and those living in poverty. Lower-income women and women with no insurance are more likely to be diagnosed at a later stage of the disease. To reduce cervical cancer mortality, it is critical to reach these rarely or never screened women.

Regular screening is critically important because early cervical cancer generally produces no signs or symptoms. Learn the new screening guidelines for your age. Talk with your doctor to determine the best Pap test schedule for you, based on your lifestyle and history. Then hold to that schedule year in and year out to maintain your cervical good health.

- cancer.gov/cancertopics/types/cervical
- HealthyWomen.org
- nccc-online.org (National Cervical Cancer Coalition)
- cancer.about.com/od/cervicalcancerbasics

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