



Health Column – January 2009

Know Your Risk Factors for Cervical Cancer

Annually, January is recognized as Cervical Cancer Screening Month and Cervical Health Awareness Month, in efforts to educate the public about cervical cancer and its prevention.

According to the American Cancer Society (ACS), it was predicted that last year there would be approximately 11,000 new cases of invasive cervical cancer in the U.S., and that nearly 4,000 women would die. Certain risk factors raise a woman's chance of developing cervical cancer. Some risk factors are controllable, others not. The ACS gives the following risk factors for cervical cancer:

- The most important risk factor is infection with HPV (human papilloma virus). HPV is a group of more than 100 types of viruses that may cause warts and cervical cancer.
- Smoking. Women who smoke are perhaps twice as likely to get cervical cancer as non-smokers.
- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS, and is NOT the same as HPV. Being HIV positive seems to make a woman's immune system less able to fight HPV and early cancers.
- Chlamydia infection. A woman may not know she is infected with this common kind of bacteria (spread through sex) unless she is specifically tested for chlamydia.
- Diets low in fruits and vegetables are linked to an increased risk of cervical and other cancers. Also, women who are overweight are at a higher risk.
- Multiple full-term pregnancies increases a woman's risk of cervical cancer, although the reason is unknown.
- DES (diethylstilbestrol) used in women during 1940 and 1971 put their daughters at a slightly higher risk of cancer of the vagina and cervix.
- Family history. Cervical cancer may run in some families—if your mother or sister had cervical cancer, your chances of getting the disease are higher.

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The Pap smear is a very effective screen for cervical cancer. This is performed at a woman's annual gynecology visit, along with a pelvic examination. It is recommended that Pap smears begin at age 21 or three years after sexual activity begins, whichever comes first. HPV testing may be performed along with the Pap smear for women who are 30 years or older.

There is a vaccine available (Gardasil), which is essentially 100 percent effective against four types of HPV: 6, 11, 16 and 18. Types 6 and 11 cause 90 percent of genital warts while types 16 and 18 cause 70 percent of cervical cancers. This vaccine is recommended for females between the ages of nine and 26. It is a series of three vaccines at zero, two and six months. It works best if it is given before any exposure to the virus occurs and if all three doses are given. It cannot be administered during pregnancy. You should contact your health care professional for more information.

If being underinsured or uninsured is a reason women do not get appropriate screening, there is help available. The Cancer Service Program in your county provides free Pap test screenings. For more information on screening programs and upcoming screening events in your area, call 1-888-345-0225.

Dr. Siobhan Hayden is chief of obstetrics and gynecology at Bassett Healthcare.