

CERVICAL CANCER: A potentially life threatening disease

Cervical cancer is cancer of the cervix, the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. Cervical cancer is a serious condition that you should know about, and this article will hopefully give you the information needed.

Cervical cancer is a serious condition that takes over 3,700 friends, wives, others, daughters, and sisters from us every year in the United States. It is the second leading cause of cancer deaths among women worldwide. It is not considered to be hereditary. It is caused by certain types of a common virus, human papillomavirus or HPV. There are many types of HPV and most are harmless, but others can be quite serious, like the ones that can cause cervical cancer.

What is HPV?

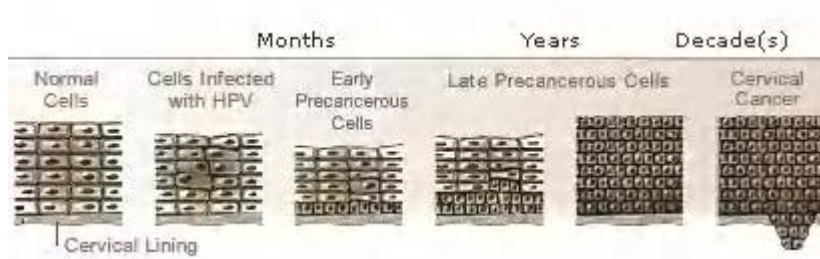
HPV is a common virus and there are 100 types of HPV, most of which are harmless. For most people, the body's own defense system will clear the virus.

- ✚ The CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention), estimates that approximately 20 million Americans have genital HPV
- ✚ CDC estimates that at least 50% of sexually active people will get HPV during their lifetime.
- ✚ In 2000, approximately 9.2 million young adults, 15 to 24 years of age, had genital HPV.
- ✚ Of the more than 6 million new cases of genital HPV diagnosed each year in the United States, an estimated 74% of them occur in 15 to 24 year olds.

How does HPV become cervical cancer?

When a woman becomes infected with certain "high-risk" types of HPV (such as HPV Types 16 and 18) and her body does not clear the infection, abnormal cells can develop in the lining of her cervix. If these abnormal cells are not discovered early, they can become cervical pre-cancer and then cancer. In most cases, this process can take a number of years, although in rare instances it can happen within a year.

Progression of abnormal cervical cells



HPV vaccine:

In June 2006, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) voted to recommend the first vaccine developed to prevent cervical cancer and other diseases in females caused by certain types of genital HPV. The vaccine, Gardasil®, protects against four HPV types, which together cause 70% of cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently licensed this vaccine for use in girls/women, ages 9-26 years. The vaccine is given through a series of three shots over a six-month period. The HPV vaccine is recommended for 11-12 year-old girls, and can be given to girls as young as 9. The vaccine is also recommended for 13-26 year-old girls/women who have not yet received or completed the vaccine series. These recommendations have been proposed by the ACIP—a national group of experts that advises the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on vaccine issues. These recommendations are now being considered by CDC.

Studies have found the vaccine to be almost 100% effective in preventing diseases caused by the four HPV types covered by the vaccine— including pre-cancers of the cervix, vulva and vagina, and genital warts. The vaccine has mainly been studied in young women who had not been exposed to any of the four HPV types in the vaccine. The vaccine was less effective in young women who had already been exposed to one of the HPV types covered by the vaccine. This vaccine does not treat existing HPV infections, genital warts, pre-cancers or cancers.

At what age does cervical cancer strike?

Half of all females diagnosed with cervical cancer are between 35 and 55 years of age. At this age, they may be raising children and contributing to the income and overall well-being of their families. However, many of these women may not realize that they were probably exposed to one of the “high-risk” types of HPV during their teens and 20s. That is why it is so important to talk with your doctor early on and learn more about pap tests, which help detect abnormal cell changes in the cervix before they become cancerous.

How common is it?

In 2006, the American Cancer Society estimates there will be about 9,710 new cases of cervical cancer diagnosed in the United States, and that about 3,700 women will die from the disease. Race also seems to play a role in your chances of developing cervical cancer. It happens to Hispanic women twice as often as it does to Caucasian women. And African American women develop this cancer at about one and a half times the rate that of Caucasian women do.

How do I decrease my chances of getting cervical cancer?

Since cervical cancer is caused by certain types of HPV, the best way to avoid cervical cancer is to avoid being exposed to genital HPV. Another important thing to remember is that by going to your doctor and having regular pap tests, you can also help reduce your chances of developing cervical cancer. This simple test that can detect abnormal cervical cells has greatly reduced cervical cancer deaths in the United States. That is because cervical pre-cancer, and even some cancers, can be treated successfully if they are detected early before they have the chance to spread. The ACS states that between 60% and 80% of women who are newly diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer had not had a pap test within the 5 years before being diagnosed and many had never had one at all. That is why you should follow your doctor's recommendation about pap tests.

What happens if I have an abnormal pap test?

If the results of your pap test are abnormal, here are a few tests your doctor may recommend:

- ✚ Another pap test- to verify if abnormal cervical cells are actually present
- ✚ An HPV DNA test- to detect the "high risk" types of HPV that can cause abnormal cervical cells and cervical cancer
- ✚ A colposcopy- to closely examine the cervix for abnormalities
- ✚ A biopsy- to see if precancerous or cancerous cells are present

Having an abnormal Pap test means you may need to take further action. Unfortunately, cervical cancer may not show any signs or symptoms until it has reached an advanced stage. Signs of cervical cancer may include:

- ✚ Abnormal vaginal bleeding
- ✚ Bleeding after sexual intercourse
- ✚ Unusual vaginal discharge
- ✚ Pelvic pain

So, if you have any of these symptoms, it is important to see your doctor as soon as possible. Like other cancers, cervical cancer can be treated in several different ways. The decision of which treatment method to use is something a doctor and patient can make together, based on several factors, including:

- ✚ The size of the cancer and whether it has spread
- ✚ The woman's age and overall Health Promotion
- ✚ Patient preference

After considering these factors, the doctor will most likely recommend one of these treatments or a combination of them.

- ✚ Surgery- operation to remove the cancer
- ✚ Radiation therapy- uses high-energy x-rays to destroy or damage cancer cells
- ✚ Chemotherapy- use of a medicine or combination of medicines to treat cancer and is often injected into a vein or given by mouth.

It is important to remember that everyone is unique and responds to treatment differently. What is right for one person may not be right for someone else. Of course, no matter which treatment is selected, the chances for recovery are better when the cancer is found early. Based on when the cancer is diagnosed, the overall 5-year survival rate for cervical cancer is about 73%, according to ACS.

References:

<http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/STDFact-HPV-vaccine.htm>

<http://cervical-cancer.hpv.com/index.html>