

Cervical Cancer and Pap Test Screenings

Facts:

- Between 60% and 80% of American women with newly diagnosed invasive cervical cancers have not had a Pap smear in the past 5 years, and many of these women have never had a Pap test.
- Cancer of the cervix may be prevented or detected early by regular Pap tests. If it is detected early, cervical cancer is one of the most successfully treatable cancers.
- In the United States, the cervical cancer death rate declined by 74% between 1955 and 1992, in large part due to the effectiveness of Pap smear screening. The death rate continues to decline each year.

Risk Factors:

- Exposure to the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) as certain types of HPV can cause cervical cancer. Minimize risk by practicing safe sex techniques to avoid contracting this sexually transmitted disease.
- Stop smoking. Women who smoke are about twice as likely as those who don't to get cervical cancer.
- Having a high number of full-term pregnancies (7 or more) increases the risk of cervical cancer.
- Long-term use of oral contraceptives (5 years or more) increases the risk of cervical cancer.

Symptoms of Cervical Cancer:

- Bleeding when something comes in contact with the cervix, such as during sexual intercourse or insertion of a diaphragm.
- Pain during sexual intercourse.
- Abnormal vaginal discharge containing mucus that may be tinged with blood.
- Abnormal bleeding or a significant change in menstrual cycle.

Pelvic Exam and Pap Test Screening:

- A pelvic exam is an important part of preventative health care for adult women. To perform an exam, your health care provider will insert a lubricated speculum into your vagina. The speculum gently spreads apart the vaginal walls, allowing the inside of the vagina, uterus, ovaries and the cervix to be examined. A bimanual exam is usually done at the same time to determine if there are abnormalities not noted simply by a visual exam.
- Your health care provider will then collect several samples of cells from your cervix using a cotton swab, brush or a small spatula. In women who do not have a cervix, cells from the vagina are collected if a Pap test is needed.
- A Pap test is done to look for changes in the cells of the cervix. The sample is then spread on a slide (Pap smear) and sent to a lab for examination under a microscope. The cells are examined for abnormal cell changes, such as dysplasia (abnormal cell findings) or cervical cancer. Presence of dysplasia means that these abnormal cells are at an increased risk of becoming cancerous.

Partnering with your health care professional will allow the two of you to decide the best care for you.