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Cervical Cancer Awareness Month

I indicated in last week's article that I was going to continue to discuss healthy food choices this week. However, I will return to that subject next week because I feel as though this information written by Courtney Schoessow and Meghan Wernicke on cervical cancer is extremely important.

January is designated as National Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. What does this mean for you? First, it means that it is time to learn the facts about cervical cancer. More importantly, it means that it is time for you to take the time to make sure you and your loved ones are doing all that you can to prevent cervical cancer. While cervical cancer only occurs in women, it is important for men to learn about it, too, because it can impact their mothers, daughters, wives, and friends.

Cervical cancer was once one of the most common forms of cancer death, but since 1955, cervical cancer deaths have been on the decline. This decline is largely attributed to the pap test, which helps find pre-cancers early so they can be treated before they turn into cervical cancer. Cervical cancer occurs in the cervix, the area that connects the uterus and vagina. In most cases, it is caused by Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection. The reason HPV can cause cervical cancer is unknown, but researchers believe that HPV interferes with substances that keep cervical cells from growing out of control and becoming cancerous. There are many different strains of HPV, and many times an HPV infection will not cause cervical cancer. While HPV infections cannot be treated, the abnormal cell growth (pre-cancers) they can cause can be treated when found in their early stages.

Most cases of cervical cancer can be prevented. The first method of prevention is to prevent pre-cancers from ever forming, which means avoiding factors that put you at higher risk for cervical cancer. For a complete list of these factors and more information on cervical cancer and other preventative measures, please consult: www.cancer.org
<http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/index.php>

One way to prevent cervical cancer is to have a pap test. A pap test can detect HPV infections and pre-cancers, which can then be treated before they turn into cervical cancers. A pap test examines cells scraped from the cervix to see if they are normal. An HPV DNA test is another useful screening test that can be used in women over the age of 30. The HPV DNA test examines the DNA of cervical cells, looking for genetic information on cell growth, division, and function. The following is recommended by the American Cancer Society:

* All women start getting regular pap tests about three years after they first begin having sex, but no later than age 21.

* Pap tests should be done every year if the conventional method is used, and every two years if the newer liquid-based method is used.

* Beginning at age 30, women who have had three or more normal pap tests in a row may start getting the pap test every two to three years. Another option for women over 30 is to have a pap test every year plus the HPV DNA test.

* Women with certain risk factors (HIV infection, weakened immune system) should have the pap test every year.

* Women over 70 and who have had three or more normal tests in a row (and no abnormal tests in the past ten years) may choose to stop having the test. But women with other risk factors or who have previously had cervical cancer should continue having the test as long as they are in good health.

* Women who have had a total hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and cervix) for reasons other than having cancer or a precancerous lesion may choose to stop having the test.

The Texas AgriLife Extension Service and the Texas Cancer Council remind you to learn the facts and do all that you can for yourself and those you care about to prevent cervical cancer.

Source: Courtney J. Schoessow, MPH, Extension Program Specialist B Texas AgriLife Extension Service, and Meghan Wernicke. January 2008. Texas AgriLife Extension Service Family and Consumer Sciences website: <http://fcs.tamu.edu/>

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