

## “JANUARY IS NATIONAL CERVICAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH”

It's a new year, 2006, and there are so many things to do in the year ahead. It's important to remember that *January is National Cervical Cancer Awareness Month*. Today, cervical cancer continues to be a serious threat. This year, about 10,370 new cases of invasive cervical cancer will be diagnosed in the United States. About 3,710 of these women will die from this disease. But this does not have to be you! Let's talk for a moment about cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer tends to occur in midlife. Half of the women who are diagnosed with cervical cancer are between the ages of 35 and 55. It rarely occurs in women younger than 20 years old. Although cervical cancer does not usually affect young women, many older women do not realize that they still are at risk of developing cervical cancer as they grow older. Slightly over 20 percent of women with cervical cancer are diagnosed when they are over 65 years old.

So what can we do to decrease our risk of dying from cervical cancer? Early detection via health screenings, such as pap tests, are an important step. When cervical cancer is found and treated early, it often can be 100 percent cured. Since 1995, the number of deaths from cervical cancer has declined significantly. The main reason for this decrease is the use of pap test to find cervical cancer early.

Let's talk about the pap test. Two examinations can help you discover cancer early: a pap test and pelvic examination. A pap test or pap smear is a procedure used to collect cells from the cervix. After the cells are collected, a health care professional will look at those cells under a microscope. The pap test has been the most successful screening test ever in preventing cancer.

When you go to a clinic or doctor's office for a pap test, another part of your exam should include a pelvic exam. Many people confuse pelvic exams and pap test. During a pelvic exam, the health care provider looks at, and feels, your reproductive organs, including the uterus and the ovaries, and may test for sexually transmitted illnesses. A pelvic exam will not find cervical cancer at an early stage and cannot find abnormal cells of the cervix. That is why the pap test is conducted just before the pelvic exam. Pelvic exams may help find other types of cancers and reproductive problems, but only pap tests can give information on early cervical cancer or pre-cancers.

You might be wondering how often you should get a pap test and pelvic exam. The American Cancer Society recommends that all women should begin cervical cancer testing about 3 years after they begin having vaginal intercourse, but no later than 21 years old. After that a woman should have a pap test and pelvic exam every year. Women who are 30 years old or older

and have had three normal pap test results in a row may get tested every 2 to 3 years. However, if you have certain risk factors such as HIV or a weakened immune system because of an organ transplant, chemotherapy, or chronic steroid use, you should continue to be tested yearly. If you are over 70 years old and have had three or more normal pap tests in a row and no abnormal pap results in the past 10 years, you may choose to stop having cervical cancer testing. Women with a history of cervical cancer, HIV, or a weakened immune system should continue to have testing as long as they are in good health.

If you've had a total hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and cervix), you may also choose to stop having cervical cancer testing unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical cancer or pre-cancer. Women who have had a hysterectomy without removal of the cervix should continue testing for cervical cancer or pre-cancer, following the previously mentioned guidelines.

There are several things you can do to increase the accuracy of your tests:

- Try not to schedule an appointment for a time during your menstrual period.
- Do not douche for 48 hours before the test.
- Do not have sexual intercourse for 48 hours before the test.
- Do not use tampons, birth control foams, jellies, or other vaginal creams or vaginal medications for 48 hours before the test.

You may not want to be checked for cervical cancer because you're worried that the doctor might find something wrong. Please remember that the pap test has been more successful than any other screening test in preventing cancer. But pap tests are not perfect. One of its limitations is that the cells are examined by people, so it's not always possible to make an accurate analysis of the hundreds of thousands of cells in each sample. Engineers, scientists, and doctors are working together to improve this test. Because some abnormalities may be missed, it is not a good idea to have this test less often than recommended by the American Cancer Society's guidelines. If abnormal cells are found, you will need to have other tests to find out whether a precancerous change or cancer is present.

There is good news! When found early, cervical cancer can often be 100 percent cured! If the cancer is a little more advanced but hasn't spread to the lymph nodes or elsewhere, the survival rate is still 92 percent. Being tested for this disease is very important because you have a great chance of surviving this disease if it is caught early. Do this for yourself and for your family, friends, and community – they need you.

Now, let's be honest. When was your last pap test? When was your last pelvic exam? Does it fit within the guidelines recommended by the American Cancer Society? Taking charge

of your health now can lead to a healthier tomorrow. Start this year by getting screened!

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