

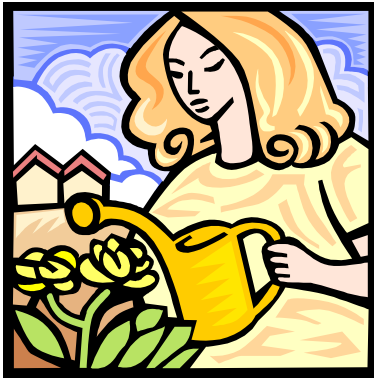
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Cooperative Extension Service

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(Health Education through Extension Leadership) Staff

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CERVICAL CANCER

The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2004, there will be about 10,520 cases of invasive cervical cancer diagnosed in the United States¹. About 3,900 women will die from cervical cancer in the United States during 2004. Cervical cancer tends to occur in midlife with half of the women diagnosed between the ages of 35 and 55. Cervical cancer rarely occurs in women younger than 20. Older women need to realize that they are still at risk of developing cervical cancer as they age. Just over 20% of women with cervical cancer are diagnosed when they are over 65. It is important for older women to continue having regular Pap tests at least until age 70, and possibly longer.



WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cervical cancer is a disease in which malignant (cancer) cells form in the cervix. Sometimes, cells on the surface of the cervix appear abnormal but not cancerous. Scientists believe that some abnormal changes in cells on the cervix are the first step in a series of slow changes that can lead to cancer years later. That is, some abnormal changes are precancerous and may become cancerous with time.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I AM AT RISK?

A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. Several risk factors increase your chance of developing cervical cancer. These risk factors increase the odds of developing cervical cancer, however many women with these risks do not develop this disease. Women who do not have any of the risk factors will rarely develop cervical cancer.

The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection by the human papillomavirus (HPV). Doctors believe that most women must have had this virus before they developed cervical cancer. Certain types of HPV, cause cancer of the cervix. HPV 16 and HPV 18 are considered "high-risk" types of HPV and cause about half of all cervical cancers. **Remember, HPV does not always cause warts or other visible symptoms, so a person may have the virus and pass it on without knowing it.**

Certain types of sexual behavior increase a woman's risk of getting HPV:

- Sex at an early age
- Number of sexual partners
- Having unprotected sex with uncircumcised males



RECOMMENDED CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING GUIDELINES BY THE NATIONAL CANCER INSTITUTE

- Cervical cancer screening should begin no later than three years after having sexual intercourse, but no later than at 21 years old. Keep in mind, transient HPV infections and significant cancer cells changes take years for significant abnormality or cancer to develop. Cervical cancer is extremely rare in women under the age of 25.
- All women should have a Pap test at least once every three years.
- Upon consultation with their health care provider, women 65 to 70 years of age who have had at least three normal Pap tests and no abnormal Pap tests in the last 10 years may decide to stop cervical cancer screening.
- Women who have had a total hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and cervix) do not need to undergo cervical cancer screening, unless the surgery was done as a treatment for cervical pre-cancer or cancer.
- Women should seek expert medical advice about when they should begin screening, how often they should be screened, and when they can discontinue cervical cancer screenings, especially if they are at higher than average risk of cervical cancer due to factors such as HIV infection.

Note: *The frequency for having pap tests depends on your age and risk factors for cervical cancer.* For more information about cervical cancer and screening, please call the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service at **1-800-4-CANCER**.

ADDITIONAL RISK FACTORS:

Cigarette Smoking – Women who smoke are twice as likely to develop cervical cancer.

Poor Diet – Women with diets low in fruits and vegetables may be at an increased risk.

Multiple Pregnancies – Women who have had many full-term pregnancies have an increased risk.

Low Socio-Economic Status – Women who are poor may be at an increased risk due to lack of medical coverage and the ability to obtain regular pap smears.

Family History of Cervical Cancer – Recent studies show that women whose mother or sister has had cervical cancer are more likely to develop the disease.

Weakened Immune System – Viruses such as HIV damage the body's immune system, making women more at risk for HPV, which may increase the risk of cervical cancer.

Long-Term Use of Oral Contraceptives (the birth control pill) – There is evidence that long-term use of birth control pills (10 years or more) may be associated with an increased risk of cancer of the cervix.

Get Moving Kentucky! Monthly Health Tip

Make this the year you get moving and stick to it. Start slowly and progress gradually. If you aren't physically active right now, slowly add in 10-15 minutes of physical activity a day. Set short term goals and you'll be up to 30 minutes a day before you know it!

Sources:

- ¹ American Cancer Society
http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_4_1X_What_is_cervical_cancer_8.asp
- ² National Cancer Institute
<http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/types/cervical/>
- ³ Kentucky: Cabinet for Health Services, Department for Public Health
http://chs.ky.gov/publichealth/breast_cervical_cancer.htm

For more information on health issues in Kentucky, contact your local County Extension agent or visit the HEEL Web site at:

www.ca.uky.edu/HEEL