



WSL Health Topics:

Cervical Cancer is 100% preventable! Here's how!

By Jacci Thompson-Dodd, MA, MSSS

Cervical cancer is unique among all cancers in that the cause of the disease is now well known. It is a virus called HPV. Not to be confused with HIV, HPV stands for human papillomavirus. There are numerous types of HPV but only some may cause cervical cancer. Although HPV is common, cancer is rare.

Most people get HPV sometime in their life. The HPV types that cause cervical cancer and genital warts are passed by skin-to-skin contact with the genital area. You do not have to have intercourse to get it; any sort of mutual sexual activity can expose you to HPV. African American women in their middle and senior years have the highest incidence of cervical cancer. Just because you are in a monogamous relationship, you are not immune from having HPV.

Just like a cold virus, HPV is usually cleared on its own in a short time. But if HPV does not go away, cervical cancer can develop. Unlike a cold, however, HPV usually has no obvious symptoms. So it takes diligent self-care in the form of regular health screenings to detect. Fortunately, there are two preventive health screenings that can prevent cervical cancer.



The Pap test

Also known as the Pap smear, this test examines cervical cells to detect any abnormal changes caused by HPV. The cells may be smeared on a slide by your practitioner and then examined under a microscope in the laboratory. Or, for a newer form of the Pap test called a Liquid Pap, the cells are placed in a vial of liquid. A slide is then made in the laboratory and examined for abnormal change of the cells.

The HPV Test

The HPV Test looks for HPV, the virus that causes abnormal cell changes. The test can be performed from the same sample as your liquid based Pap or can be collected in a separate tube at the time of your Pap test. It is the ideal companion to your cervical health regimen. By having both tests, the doctors can monitor any cellular changes in your cervix, and the presence of HPV.

Both the Pap test and the HPV test are collected during your pelvic exam. Your healthcare provider uses an instrument called a speculum to open the vagina and collect cells from your cervix – the donut-shaped opening to your uterus.

Together the Pap and HPV tests give a powerful one-two punch in the fight against cervical cancer.

Cervical Cancer Prevention is a Lifespan Issue



From tweens to queens, there is something you can do to prevent cervical cancer. There is now a vaccine available for girls to prevent cervical cancer called Gardasil. The science behind this vaccination is to reach girls before they are exposed to the strains of HPV that cause cervical cancer and build their immunity against the virus. But all young women from 9 to 26 are eligible for the vaccine and those who have already had sex may still benefit from receiving it.

We believe every family should know about and discuss whether the vaccine is appropriate for your daughter(s). Cervical cancer – left untreated – can rob a woman of her ability to have children. The anguish of having your womb removed at a young age due to cervical cancer is life-altering. One amazing young woman who is courageous enough to share her story is Tamika Felder. She was diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer at the age of 25, and is now a respected champion of cervical cancer prevention. Before you dismiss the HPV vaccine, read Tamika's story at <http://www.tamikaandfriends.org>, then decide.

Self-Care is the ONLY care that can prevent Cervical Cancer

All these effective technologies are worthless if you don't use them! You must be an active partner in your health by learning about AND using all the tools that are available to you.

- If you or your daughter is between 9 and 26 years old, speak with your healthcare provider about the HPV vaccine.
- All women should begin receiving the Pap test three years after the first sexual encounter or by age 21 – whichever comes first. Please ask your doctor for a Liquid Pap at the time of your appointment.
- If you are 30 years old or older, **Request the Test** along with your Pap. The HPV Test is available to you now even if your practitioner is not offering it yet! That's why you've got to be assertive – **Request the Test!**™
- If you are between 21 and 30 years old and have an inconclusive Pap, **Request the Test.**

- Continue the regimen of routine Pap and HPV tests until age 70. Even if circumstances are such that you no longer engage in sexual activity, you may still be carrying HPV in your cervical cells. If by age 70, you have had three consecutive negative Pap tests and no inconclusive Pap test in the last 10 years, you might be able to stop screening. Please discuss this with your healthcare provider before you discontinue these tests.

Women who have had a total hysterectomy (with uterus and cervix removed) for reasons other than cancer may discontinue the Pap and HPV test screenings. If you have had a hysterectomy with the cervix left in place, you should continue screening as noted above.

After your exam, **Request the Test** results! Don't assume that since your healthcare provider's office hasn't contacted you that everything is okay. Make sure to call them back in a week, and keep calling until you get your results.

- If your cervical screening tests are negative, don't forget the rest of your body. Though you'll only need to repeat these tests every 3 years, you still need an annual check-up.
- If either test is positive, talk with your healthcare provider and make a follow-up plan. Your health and peace of mind depend on it. Remember: This insidious HPV virus can live dormant in your cervical cells for years—even decades—then begin to cause abnormal change of the cells that sometimes progress to cancer without detection. So if your Pap and/or HPV tests are positive, please do not assume that your partner has been unfaithful.

Remember. Cervical cancer is 100% preventable! But it all depends on you.

Resources

There is a wonderful brochure called "Cervical Cancer and HPV: What Every Sister Should Know" that gives easy-to-understand details about cervical cancer prevention. It was created by The Isis Project, a cervical cancer prevention program developed especially for African American women. Visit The Isis Project at http://www.theisisproject.org/spread_the_word/ to get your free copy.

For more information on Gardasil visit <http://www.gardasil.com>.

For more information on the HPV test, visit <http://www.thehpvtest.com/HPV-resources.html>.

Don't despair if you do not have any health insurance. Most states provide access to cervical cancer screening for women without insurance through the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP). Check out this CDC website <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/cancercontacts/nbccedp/contacts.asp> or call 1-888-842-6355 to find no or low-cost screenings.

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A member of the Minority Women's Health Panel of Experts for the Office on Women's Health, Ms. Thompson-Dodd serves on two panels for the National Cancer Institute, and the Board of Trustees for Cancer Lifeline. For more information on WeSpeakLoudly, visit, www.wespeakloudly.com.

