

January is National Cervical Health Awareness Month

The month of January has been designated by the U.S. Congress as Cervical Health Awareness Month. It was established by the National Cervical Cancer Coalition to help raise awareness of this preventable disease and to promote cervical cancer screening.

Cervical cancer used to be one of the most common causes of death among American women prior to the use of the Pap test. Between 1955 and 1992, the cervical cancer death rate declined by 74% after the introduction of its use. In 2010, the California Cancer Registry (CCR) projects that 1,430 women will get the disease and 445 will die from it. Hispanic women are at the highest risk of developing cervical cancer. Their risk is twice that of non-Hispanic white women, African American and Asian/Pacific Islander women.

In California, from 2003-2007, cervical cancer was the fourth most common cancer among Laotian and Cambodian women, the 5th most common cancer among Pacific Islander women, and the 6th most common cancer among Hispanic women, indicating that education regarding the benefits of screening for this preventable disease needs to be targeted to women who have recently immigrated to the United States.

One of the strongest predictors of cancer survival is the stage at diagnosis. Stage at diagnosis indicates how far a cancer has spread when it is first discovered. Generally, the earlier the stage at diagnosis, the better the outlook for the patient. When cervical cancer is diagnosed at the local stage, there is a five-year survival rate of 92%. The five-year survival drops to 56% when it is diagnosed at the regional stage, and drops further to 17% when it is diagnosed at the distant stage, or when it has spread to other organs.

The most important risk factor for developing cervical cancer is infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV) or genital warts.

Another important risk factor for developing cervical cancer is smoking. Women who smoke are two times more likely to develop the disease than those who don't.

Preventing Cervical Cancer

The FDA has approved a vaccine to prevent the major types of HPV infection-those that cause cervical cancer and those that cause genital warts. The vaccine is routinely recommended by the American Cancer Society for girls ages 11 to 12 years, or for girls ages 13-18 to catch up with the vaccines that were missed in order to complete the series of vaccinations. The vaccine can prevent up to 70% of new cases and deaths each year in California. Hispanic and Asian women are less likely to receive the routine Pap test, and are thus at greater risk of developing the disease, in comparison to African American and non-Hispanic white women.

There are two methods to detect or prevent cervical cancer. They are the Pap test (or Pap smear), which looks for precancerous lesions on the cervix, and the HPV test, which identifies this virus, which can ultimately cause cervical cells to become cancerous.

The American Cancer Society and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend all women begin screening for cervical cancer 3 years after the start of vaginal intercourse, but no later than age 21. Screening should occur annually with conventional pap tests. If a woman has had 3 consecutive normal tests at or after age 30, screenings can occur every two to three years.

In addition, the HPV test may be used to screen women 30 years and older, or women of any age who have had uncertain Pap test results.

Current Cervical Cancer Research Using CCR Data

CCR data has been used in cervical cancer research to evaluate the psychosocial functioning of African American, European American, and Latina American women with cervical cancer; race and age disparity in treatment among cervical cancer patients; how stress and the immune system play a role in cervical cancer; and how cultural health beliefs, health behaviors, and health-related quality of life affect cancer survival among multiethnic breast and cervical cancer survivors.

CCR provides incidence rates (new cases) and mortality rates (deaths) of cervical and many other types of cancer by county from 1988 to 2007. These data are available on the CCR website at www.ccrca.org. Note: Demographic variables, such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle choices etc. need to be taken into account when interpreting the findings.

Cervical Cancer Resources

For additional resources on cervical cancer, go to:

California Department of Public Health- Cancer Detection Section:

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CancerDetection/Pages/CancerDetectionProgramsEveryWomanCounts.aspx>

California Department of Public Health- Office of Women's Health:

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CancerDetection/Pages/CancerDetectionProgramsEveryWomanCounts.aspx>

California Department of Public Health-Sexually Transmitted Disease Control Branch

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/std/Pages/default.aspx>

National Cancer Institute: <http://www.nci.nih.gov/cancertopics/types/cervical/>

American Cancer Society:

http://www.cancer.org/docroot/CRI/content/CRI_2_4_1X_what_is_cervical_cancer_8.asp

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/cervical/>

National Cervical Cancer Coalition: <http://www.nccc-online.org/index.html>