

- Cervical cancer

Early screening is the key to fighting cervical cancer

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Cervical cancer is a cancer that begins in the cervix. Cancer is characterized by the uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells in the body. In this case, this uncontrolled growth happens in the cervix, the lower part of the uterus (womb) that continues down and opens into the vagina or the birth canal.

This month, the Department of Health (DOH) said, is "cervical cancer Awareness Month."

In the Philippines, the DOH said, cervical cancer is the 2nd leading cancer site among women.

An estimated 7,277 new cases of, and 3,807 deaths due to, cervical cancer are expected to occur every year. Generally, all women who have had sexual intercourse are at risk of cervix cancer.

"To mothers and our women, get regular check-ups and vaccinated against human papilloma virus to prevent cervical cancer," Health Undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergeire said.

Cervical cancer is caused by HPV or the human Papillomavirus, Vergeire said.

Strains of HPV

There are many strains of HPV, the more high-risk ones for cervical cancer are HPV 16 and 18.

This virus is spread through sexual contact and causes an infection in the cervix.

HPV infection can cause changes in the cells of the cervix leading to the development of pre-cancerous cells.

If left undetected and untreated, these pre-cancerous cells can turn into cervical cancer.

At risk for cervical cancer

The DOH said that any woman can get cervical cancer, which is why all women aged 25-55 should be screened every five years.

Some women have higher risk due to these risk factors:

- n Age 30 to 49

- n Smoking

- n Having HIV or other immunocompromised states

- n Having given birth to three or more children

- n Having multiple sexual partners

- n Using birth control pills for five years or longer

Prevention

The best ways to lower your chances of cervical cancer is to get vaccinated for HPV, and to be regularly screened.

The quadrivalent HPV vaccine available in the Philippines protects against the high-risk strains of HPV (6, 11, 16, 18).

This vaccine is recommended for girls at nine to 14 years old (two doses, 6-12 months apart), and can be recommended up to age 26 (starting age 15, administered in three doses, 0, 1-2, 6 months). The vaccine is also recommended for boys in the same schedule.

Screening through Visual Inspection with Acetic Acid (VIA) can quickly detect the presence of precancerous lesions at the cervix.

A regular pap smear can detect early changes in the cervical cells and can prompt further tests and closer follow-ups for monitoring, and appropriate treatment as needed. Even after vaccination, all women aged 25-55 should still be regularly screened for cervical cancer.

You can further lower your risk by eliminating other risk factors and practicing healthy behaviors:

- n Practice safe sex, use condoms and limit number of sexual partners

- n Quit smoking, avoid secondhand smoke

The HPV vaccine is safe and effective. Adverse reactions, when they occur, are usually minor. The DOH stressed that HPV vaccine has no impact on a girl's fertility and does not affect her capacity to get pregnant and have healthy children later.

Screening

ALL women aged 25 to 55 should be screened for cervical cancer every five years.

Women living with HIV are at greater risk for cervical cancer and should be screened every three years.

Closer intervals between screenings may also be recommended by your doctor.

Consult with your primary care provider to learn more about screening options.

Visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) is a simple and inexpensive screening test done by your doctor. It involves the use of a speculum instrument to visualize the cervical area and applying dilute acetic acid (3 to 5 percent) on the cervix. Abnormal tissue will appear white when exposed to the acetic acid.

A pap smear is a quick collection of cells in the cervix done by your doctor. This shouldn't usually hurt, but it might be uncomfortable.

The cells collected are then sent to the lab to be examined under a microscope. The results come back a few days later.

All women with positive screening tests should receive treatment.

Symptoms and signs to watch out for cervical cancer may not have signs or symptoms at all in the early stages, which is why regular screening is critical for prevention and early detection.

Later on, some signs and symptoms that should alert you to seek immediate medical attention include:

- n Foul smelling vaginal discharge

- n Vaginal bleeding after intercourse

- n Vaginal bleeding after menopause