CERVICAL CANCER AWARENESS MONTH: EMPOWERING WOMEN TO TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR HEALTH.

Cervical cancer develops in a woman's cervix (the entrance to the uterus from the vagina).

Almost all cervical cancer cases (99%) are linked to infection with high-risk human papillomaviruses (HPV), an extremely common virus transmitted through sexual contact.

Although most infections with HPV resolve spontaneously and cause no symptoms, persistent infection can cause cervical cancer in women.

Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women. According to WHO in 2024, an estimated 660 000 women were diagnosed with cervical cancer worldwide and about 350 000 women died from the disease.

Factors that increase the risk that an HPV infection will cause cancer

Some risk factors make it more likely for a person who has a high-risk HPV infection of the cervix to develop cervical cancer. These risk factors include:

- **Having a weakened immune system.** This can lower the body's ability to fight an HPV infection. HPV infections are more likely to be persistent and progress to cancer in people who are immunocompromised than in people who are not immunocompromised. You may be immunocompromised if you:
  - have an HIV infection or another disease that weakens your immune system
  - take medicine to suppress your immune response, such as to prevent organ rejection after a transplant, to treat an autoimmune disease, or to treat cancer
- **Smoking or breathing in secondhand smoke.** People who smoke or breathe in secondhand smoke have an increased risk of developing cervical cancer. The risk increases the more a person smokes or is exposed to secondhand smoke.
- **Reproductive factors.** Both the use of oral contraceptives (birth control pills) and giving birth to many children are associated with an increased risk of cervical cancer. The reasons for these associations are not well understood.
- **Obesity.** Cervical cancer screening may be more difficult in those with obesity, leading to lower detection of precancers and a higher risk of cancer.

What is cervical cancer screening?

The goal of screening for cervical cancer is to find precancerous cervical cell changes, when treatment can prevent cervical cancer from developing. Sometimes, cancer is found during cervical screening. Cervical cancer found at an early stage is usually easier to treat. By the time symptoms appear, cervical cancer may have begun to spread, making treatment more difficult.

There are three main ways to screen for cervical cancer:

- The human papillomavirus (HPV) test checks cells for infection with high-risk HPV types that can cause cervical cancer.
- The Pap test (also called a Pap smear or cervical cytology) collects cervical cells so they can be checked for changes caused by HPV that may—if left untreated—turn into cervical cancer. It can find precancerous cells and cervical cancer cells. A Pap test also sometimes finds conditions that are not cancer, such as infection or inflammation.
- The HPV/Pap cotest uses an HPV test and Pap test together to check for both high-risk HPV and cervical cell changes.

When to get screened for cervical cancer

According to United States Preventive Services Task Force Exit Disclaimer (USPSTF) and the American Cancer Society Exit Disclaimer (ACS) screening for cervical cancer and test and will depend on age and health history. Because HPV vaccination does not prevent infection with all high-risk HPV types, vaccinated people who have a cervix should follow cervical cancer screening recommendations.

Age 21-29 years

If you are in this age group, it is recommended getting your first Pap test at age 21, followed by Pap testing every 3 years. Even if you are sexually active, you do not need a Pap test before age 21.

Age 30-65 years

If you are in this age group, it is recommended getting screened for cervical cancer using one of the following methods:

- HPV test every 5 years
- HPV/Pap cotest every 5 years
- Pap test every 3 years

Updated cervical cancer screening guidelines from ACS recommend starting screening at age 25 with an HPV test and having HPV testing every 5 years through age 65. However, testing with an HPV/Pap cotest every 5 years or with a Pap test every 3 years is still acceptable.

Older than 65 years

If you are in this age group, talk with your health care provider to learn if screening is still needed. If you have been screened regularly and had normal test results, your health care provider will probably advise you that you no longer need screening. However, if your recent test results were abnormal or you have not been screened regularly, you may need to continue screening beyond age 65.

How You Can Help

Get involved in the cervical cancer awareness cause during the Cervical Cancer Awareness Month and here is how you can contribute:

Educate Yourself and Others: Share the knowledge about how to prevent cervical cancer as well as the

need to go for screening on a regular basis.

Encourage Vaccination: Advocate within the designated age people for getting an HPV vaccination in your locality.

Support Local Initiatives: Raise awareness through social media on the cervical cancer prevention cause as well as take part in events like health fairs or fundraising activities.

Spread Awareness Online: Post on social media using the hashtags #CervicalCancerAwareness and #HPVPrevention to emphasize the celebration of Cervical Cancer Awareness Month.

Conclusion

Cervical cancer has the potential to be among the easiest types of cancers to treat, and again only when it's detected early on. Education, screening, and vaccination should be prioritized in an effort to minimize this global disease. For this January, I would like to challenge all of us to create cervical cancer-free future by helping women understand their health better and own it.