

CERVICAL CANCER “WIKI” ALERT

Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum
Chronic Diseases Program 450 Sutter Street, Suite 600 San Francisco, CA 94108
www.apiahf.org

ISSUE 5
JANUARY 2009

Basic Cervix Health and Cervical Cancer Facts

According to the American Cancer Society, in 2008 more than 11,000 women were diagnosed with cervical cancer and almost 4,000 died from it in the U.S.

Cervical cancer begins in the cells of the cervix. The cervix is found at the top of the vagina and is the narrow, lower part of the uterus or also known as the womb. The body (upper part) of the uterus, is where a fetus grows. The cervix connects the body of the uterus to the vagina, which is the birth canal. There is an opening in the middle of the cervix and this is where menstrual blood flows.

Almost all cervical cancer begins as an infection from a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). It is sexually transmitted and common among both

women and men. In the U.S., over 6 million men and women are infected with the HPV each year. About one-half to three-quarters of the people who have ever had sex will have HPV at some time in their life. There are over 100 different kinds of HPVs. Some HPVs are “low-risk” since they cause visible warts in the cervix and rarely develop into cancer. There are also 15 to 20 other types of HPVs that are “high risk” and linked to cancer.

The primary method of assessing cervical health are the Papanicolaou (Pap) test or Human Papillomavirus (HPV) test and any needed follow-up. Cervical cancer can be treated if it is found early. In fact, nearly nine out of ten women will live at least five years if cancer is found early and before it spreads outside the cervix.

“Wiki” is the Hawaiian language word for “fast.” The intent of these “Wiki” alerts are to provide brief informational resources about chronic disease issues that impact Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians & Pacific Islanders.

JANUARY IS CERVICAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

This month is dedicated to raising awareness among teen girls and women regarding the health of their cervix and cervical cancer prevention.



Cervical Cancer and Screening Statistics in Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders

- There are low rates of cervical cancer screening among Asian American women. (Maxwell et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 1999; Kim et al., 1999)
- Asian American women have very little knowledge or awareness about cervical screening and cancer. (Phipps et al., 1999; Schulmeister et al., 1999)
- While incidence rates for all other major racial groups have fallen over the years, rates of cervical cancer among Asian American women show small but significant increases. (Ries et al., 1999)
- Cervical cancer rates are highest among Laotian, Samoan and Vietnamese women, which exceed the rates among non-Hispanic White women. (Miller et al., 2008)
- Although not the leading cause of cancer deaths, cervical cancer mortality rate in Vietnamese women exceed the rates of non-Hispanic White women. (Miller et al., 2008)
- In the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), cervical cancer rates are among the highest in the world. The incidence of cervical cancer in the CNMI is comparable to third world countries. While the U.S. rate of cervical cancer in women ages 25-34 is 9/100,000, the CNMI's cervical cancer rate in the same age group is 44.2/100,000 – a 5-fold increase. (International Agency for Research on Cancer, 2000)
- Cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer mortality rates in Pohnpei. (Tsark et al., 2004)

**ASIAN
AMERICAN AND
PACIFIC
ISLANDER
WOMEN
CURRENTLY
HAVE ONE OF
THE HIGHEST
RATES OF
CERVICAL
CANCER IN THE
COUNTRY.
(NAWHO, 2000)**

Cervical Cancer Symptoms & Risk Factors

Due to no early visible signs or symptoms of cervical cancer, it is important for women to have regular screenings. Signs or symptoms usually appear when cancer has spread in the body. You should report any of these **symptoms** to your doctor:

- Any unusual discharge from your vagina, other than your normal period
- Blood spots or light bleeding, other than your normal period
- Pain or bleeding during sex

Several **risk factors** increase your chance of developing cancer of the cervix:

- If your mother or sister had cervical cancer, your chances of developing the disease are increased by 2 to 3 times.
- Not getting regular cervical cancer screenings
- Women whose immune system is weakened
- Smoking cigarettes
- Having a diet low in fruits and vegetables
- Using birth control pills for a long duration
- Having sexual intercourse before the age of 18
- Having many sexual partners
- History of sexually transmitted diseases
 - ◆ Being infected with the human papillomavirus (HPV) that causes genital warts. (Not all women who have the HPV infection or genital warts develop cancer of the cervix.)
 - ◆ Being infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
 - ◆ Being infected with genital herpes or chlamydia infections

Cervical Cancer Screenings

Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable and curable diseases through screening. There are two tests used for cervical cancer screenings.

1. **Papanicolaou (Pap) test** is a screening that checks for abnormal cells on the cervix. A Pap test can usually detect changes in a cell before it becomes cancerous. It is recommended that women have a Pap test **three years after their first sexual intercourse, but no later than 21 years of age**. National guidelines recommend a Pap test **each year until age 30 and then every two or three years if there were three negative tests in a row**.

2. **Human Papillomavirus (HPV) test** is a test to detect the presence of high-risk (cancer-causing) types of HPV. The HPV test is appropriate for women **over the age of 30**. All women over the age of 30 can benefit from getting the HPV test along with their Pap test, regardless of their Pap results.

If your cervix appears abnormal during your pelvic exam and screening, your doctor may order a **colposcopy**. It is a way for your doctor to examine your vagina, vulva (vagina opening) and cervix closely. Small tissue samples are taken from the cervix and examined for disease or other problems.

	Looks For	How it Works
Pap test	Signs of abnormal cell changes	Lab professional looks at a sample of cervical cells through a microscope
HPV Test	The virus that causes the abnormal cell changes that can lead to cervical cancer	A test is done on the sample of cervical cells by a computerized system



State Cervical Cancer Screening Program

If you are uninsured or underinsured, contact your state health department to see if you are eligible for their free to low-cost cervical cancer screenings. To find your local program go to www.cdc.gov/cancer/NBCCEDP/.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccination

In June 2006, the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which is a means of cervical cancer prevention, was approved by the Federal Drug Administration. HPV is a commonly transmitted virus through sexual skin-to-skin contact and is known to cause cervical cancer in women. A vaccine works by preventing strains of HPV 16 and 18. These two strains that the vaccine protects against are known to cause cervical cancer. The vaccine is routinely recommended for 11 and 12 year old girls, but it is also recommended for girls and women age 13 through 26 who have not yet been vaccinated or completed the vaccine series. Women will still need regular cervical cancer screening because the vaccine will NOT protect against all HPV types that cause cervical cancer. For more information go to www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hpv/default/htm.