



What older women should know about cervical cancer prevention

The National Council of Women's Organizations urges older women to understand their risk for cervical cancer and learn about a new test that can be done along with their Pap test to help protect them.

"Older women may think they no longer need to worry about cervical cancer, but that is not necessarily true," said Susan Scanlan, president of the National Council of Women's Organizations. Ms. Scanlan noted that women age 65 and older account for nearly 20% of all new cervical cancer cases and more than 35% of all deaths from the disease.

According to the American Cancer Society, this year 11,150 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer and 3,670 women will die of the disease. Cervical cancer is caused by "high-risk" types of the human papillomavirus (HPV), a common sexually transmitted infection that most women will have at some point. Most HPV infections go away on their own, but persistent infections can lead to cervical cancer if abnormal cell changes are not detected and treated earlier.

Cervical cancer can be a particular problem for older women. According to Nancy Berman, MSN, APRN, nurse practitioner at Northwest Internal Medicine Associates in West Bloomfield, Michigan, "HPV can stay in a woman's genital skin cells for years and even decades after exposure, which means women who are no longer sexually active may

still be at risk and not know it. In addition, some older women who have had a hysterectomy may think they no longer have to worry about cervical cancer. However, some women have had a hysterectomy in which the cervix was not removed. Those women still require screening for cervical cancer prevention."

Ms. Berman noted that, even with the new HPV vaccine, cervical cancer screening continues to be important for all women. The HPV vaccine does not protect against all cervical cancers and currently it is FDA-approved solely for girls and young women ages 9-26. Even those girls and young women who receive the vaccine will need to be screened regularly as they age.

The Pap test, the traditional method used to screen for cervical cancer, helps detect cellular changes caused by HPV infection. Research shows that the Pap test alone, however, is 51% to 85% accurate, depending upon the type of test used. A test for HPV is approved by the FDA and identifies women who have high-risk HPV in their cervical cells, which could potentially lead to cervical cancer. Studies show that HPV testing in conjunction with a Pap in women age 30 and older increases to nearly 100% a clinician's ability to identify women who have the risk factor for cervical cancer and will need more careful follow-up as long as the virus persists.

The American Cancer Society recommends that women over age 70 should discuss with their healthcare provider whether or not they should continue screening, based on their individual circumstances. The organization advocates provisionally, though, that women age 70 and older who have tested positively for HPV should continue screening at the discretion of their clinician.

"Knowing if an older woman has HPV could help determine if and how often she should continue to be screened," said Ms. Berman. "A negative HPV test is strong reassurance that a woman does not have risk for cervical cancer, and women who do have high-risk HPV will need careful follow-up."

Most insurance companies and state Medicaid programs cover HPV testing as part of routine cervical cancer screening. This advanced screening technique, however, is not currently covered by Medicare.



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