

Cervical Cancer Awareness: Symptoms, Risks and Early Detection

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DESCRIPTION

Cervical cancer, a malignancy that originates in the cells of the cervix, is a significant global health concern. It ranks as the fourth most common cancer among women worldwide, with over 600,000 new cases diagnosed annually. Despite its high incidence, cervical cancer is largely preventable through early detection and vaccination. This article aims to raise awareness about cervical cancer by discussing its symptoms, risk factors, and the importance of early detection.

Symptoms of cervical cancer

Abnormal vaginal bleeding: This can manifest as bleeding between periods, after sexual intercourse, or post-menopause. Unusual bleeding should be evaluated by a healthcare provider, as it may indicate cervical abnormalities.

Pelvic pain: Persistent pelvic pain or discomfort during intercourse can be a sign of cervical cancer. This pain may also be accompanied by lower back pain or pain radiating to the thighs.

Unusual vaginal discharge: Women with cervical cancer may experience a watery, pink, or foul-smelling discharge. This discharge can be different from the normal vaginal secretions and may increase in volume.

Swelling of the Legs: Advanced cervical cancer can lead to lymph node involvement, causing swelling in the legs or other areas of the body due to fluid accumulation.

Loss of appetite and weight loss: Unexplained weight loss and a decrease in appetite can occur in advanced stages of cervical cancer, reflecting systemic effects of the disease.

Risk factors for cervical cancer

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection: HPV, particularly high-risk types such as HPV-16 and HPV-18, is the primary cause of cervical cancer. Persistent infection with high-risk HPV strains can lead to changes in cervical cells and eventually cancer.

Weakened immune system: Conditions that compromise the immune system, such as HIV/AIDS or the use of immunosuppressive medications, can increase susceptibility to HPV infection and cervical cancer.

Smoking: Tobacco use is linked to a higher risk of cervical cancer. Chemicals in cigarettes can contribute to the development of cancerous cells in the cervix.

Long-term use of oral contraceptives: Women who use oral contraceptives for five or more years may have a slightly increased risk of cervical cancer. However, this risk decreases after discontinuation of the pill.

Family history of cervical cancer: A family history of cervical cancer may increase an individual's risk, suggesting a possible genetic predisposition.

Socioeconomic factors: Women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have limited access to healthcare services, including screening and vaccination, increasing their risk of cervical cancer.

Early detection and screening

Pap smear (Pap Test): The Pap smear is a screening test that involves collecting cells from the cervix to detect pre-cancerous changes or early-stage cervical cancer. It is recommended for women starting at age 21 and should be performed every three years until age 29. From ages 30 to 65, it can be combined with HPV testing every five years or continued alone every three years.

HPV testing: HPV testing detects the presence of high-risk HPV types that are associated with cervical cancer. It can be performed alongside a Pap smear or as a standalone test. HPV testing is recommended for women aged 30 and older.

Colposcopy: If abnormal results are found on a Pap smear or HPV test, a colposcopy may be performed. This procedure uses a special microscope to examine the cervix more closely and guide biopsy sampling for further analysis.

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Biopsy: A biopsy involves removing a small sample of cervical tissue for laboratory analysis to confirm the presence of cancerous cells. This procedure can be done during a colposcopy or as a separate procedure.

Follow-up and monitoring: Regular follow-up appointments and repeat screenings are essential for monitoring changes in cervical health. Women with abnormal test results should adhere to recommended follow-up procedures to ensure timely treatment if needed.

Preventive measures

HPV vaccination: The HPV vaccine is highly effective in preventing infections with the types of HPV that most commonly cause cervical cancer. It is recommended for preteens (boys and girls) aged 11-12 years, but it can be administered up to age 26, and in some cases, up to age 45. The vaccine is most effective when given before the onset of sexual activity.

Smoking cessation: Quitting smoking can reduce the risk of cervical cancer and improve overall health. Smoking cessation

programs and resources can provide support for those trying to quit.

Regular screenings: Adhering to recommended screening guidelines is crucial for early detection of cervical abnormalities. Women should discuss their screening schedule with their healthcare provider and follow through with recommended tests.

CONCLUSION

Cervical cancer remains a significant public health issue, but awareness and preventive measures can greatly reduce its impact. Understanding the symptoms, risk factors, and the importance of early detection can empower women to take proactive steps in managing their cervical health. Regular screenings, HPV vaccination, and lifestyle modifications play a vital role in preventing cervical cancer and ensuring early intervention when needed. By staying informed and engaged with their healthcare, women can contribute to better outcomes and a reduction in cervical cancer incidence.