

## National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer III: Community Networks Program

### *Cervical Cancer Fact Sheet*

Some abnormal changes in cells on the **cervix**, called *precancerous*, are the first step in a series of slow changes that can lead to cancer years later. If abnormal cells spread deeper into the cervix or to other tissues or organs, the disease is then called cervical cancer or invasive cervical cancer.

#### **What every woman should know about Cervical cancer:**

- It occurs most often in women between ages 35-55.
- It is important for older women to continue having regular Pap tests at least until age 70, and possibly longer.

#### **Risk Factors:**

Researchers believe that, in many cases, cervical cancer develops when two or more risk factors act together.

- **HPV** - The most important risk factor is infection with certain types of the human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is a sexually transmitted virus. Doctors believe that women must have been infected by this virus before they will develop cervical cancer.
- **Smoking** - Women who smoke are about twice as likely as non-smokers to get cervical cancer. Smoking exposes the body to many cancer-causing chemicals that affect more than the lungs.
- **Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection** - Because this virus damages the body's immune system, it makes women more at risk for HPV infections, which may increase the risk of cervical cancer.
- **Diet** - Women with diets low in fruits and vegetables may be at increased risk for cervical cancer. Also, overweight women are more likely to develop this cancer.
- **Oral contraceptives** - There is evidence that long-term oral contraceptive (OC) use (5 years or longer) increases the risk of cancer of the cervix.
- **Chlamydia infection** - Some recent studies suggest that women whose blood test results show past or current Chlamydia infection are at greater risk for cervical cancer than are women with a negative blood test.
- **Pap test history** - Women who have never had a Pap test or who have not had one for several years have a higher-than-average risk of developing cervical cancer.

- **Diethylstilbestrol (DES)** - DES is a hormonal drug that was prescribed between 1940 and 1971 for some women thought to be at increased risk for miscarriages. Women whose mother took DES when pregnant with them, about 1 in 1000 developed clear-cell adenocarcinoma of the vagina or cervix.
- **Family history of cervical cancer** – There may be an inherited condition that causes some women to be less able to fight off the HPV infection.

#### **Recognizing signs and symptoms:**

Symptoms usually appear when abnormal cervical cells become cancerous and invade nearby tissue. The most common symptom is abnormal bleeding.

- Bleeding may start and stop between regular menstrual periods.
- Bleeding may occur after sexual intercourse, douching, or a pelvic exam.
- Menstrual bleeding may last longer and be heavier than usual.
- Bleeding after *menopause* also may be a symptom of cervical cancer.
- Increased vaginal discharge is another symptom of cervical cancer.

Because these symptoms may be caused by other health problems, it is important for a woman to see her doctor if she is having any of these symptoms.

#### **GUIDELINES FOR EARLY DETECTION**

The National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer III feels that early detection is the key to surviving cervical cancer. It is highly curable if it is found and treated early. The National Cancer Institute Screening Guidelines, suggests that the death rate of cervical cancer will decrease if women who are or have been sexually active or who are in their late teens or older have regular Pap tests.

*For more information on cervical cancer, contact the Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER, Gynecological Oncology Group at 215-854-0770, your physician, local health department or the American Cancer Society.*

*For more information about the National Black Leadership Initiative on Cancer III, call 1-800-724-1185.*

*(Revised 8/06)*