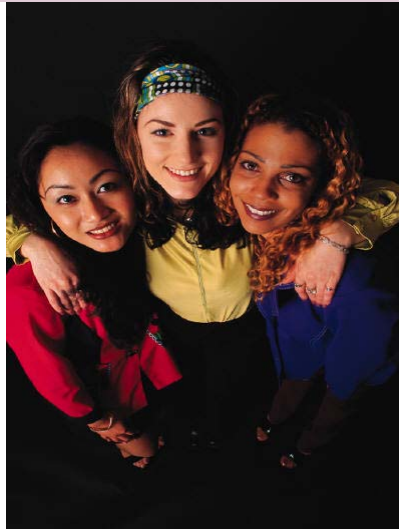


A publication of the
PINELLAS COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Cervical Cancer Awareness Month — January 2003 Regular Exams Help Prevent Cancer

Each year, about 15,000 women in the United States learn they have cancer of the cervix. The cervix is in the lower, narrow part of the uterus. The uterus is located in a woman's lower abdomen, between the bladder and the rectum. The cervix forms a canal that opens into the vagina which leads to the outside of the body.



Cancer occurs when cells become abnormal and divide without control or order. The cervix is made up of many types of cells. Normally, cells divide to produce more cells only when the body needs them. This orderly process helps keep us healthy. If cells keep dividing when new cells are not needed, a mass of tissue forms. This mass of extra tissue, called a growth or tumor, can be benign or malignant.

Benign tumors are not cancer. They can usually be removed and, in most cases, they do not come back. Most important, cells from benign tumors do not spread to other parts of the body.

Malignant tumors are cancer. Cancer cells can invade and damage tissues and organs near the tumor. Cancer cells also can break away from a malignant tumor and enter the lymphatic system or the bloodstream. This is how cervical cancer can spread to

other parts of the body. The spread of cancer is called metastasis. Most cervical cancers are squamous cell carcinomas. Squamous cells are thin, flat cells that form on the surface of the cervix. Cells on the surface of the cervix sometimes appear abnormal but are not cancerous.

Scientists believe that some abnormal changes in cells on the cervix are the first step in a series of slow

changes that could lead to cancer years later. Pre-cancerous changes of the cervix usually do not cause pain. In fact, they generally do not cause any symptoms and are not detected except through a pelvic exam and a Pap test.

The Pap test is a simple test to detect abnormal cells in and around the cervix. Women should have a Pap test at age 18 or older or younger if they have been sexually active.

If all women had pelvic exams and Pap tests regularly, most pre-cancerous conditions would be detected and treated before cancer develops. That way, most invasive cancers

Our Vision

**Healthier
People
In A
Healthier
Environment**

Pinellas County Health Department

Regular Exams Help Prevent Cancer continued

would be prevented. Any invasive cancer that does occur would likely be found at an early, curable stage. Treatment for a pre-cancerous lesion of the cervix depends on a number of factors. The factors include whether the lesion is low or high grade, whether the woman wants to have children in the future, the woman's age, and general health and the preference of the woman and her doctor.

The choice of treatment for cervical cancer depends on the location and size of the tumor, the

stage of the disease, the woman's age, and general health.

The outlook for women with pre-cancerous changes of the cervix or very early cancer of the cervix is excellent; nearly all patients with these conditions can be cured. At present, early detection and treatment of pre-cancerous tissue remain the most effective ways of preventing cervical cancer.


(Source: National Cancer Institute booklet, *What You Need to Know about Cancer of the Cervix.*)

If You Have Cervical Cancer, 10 Questions to Ask Your Doctor

1. What is the stage (extent) of my disease?
2. What are my treatment choices, which do you recommend and why?
3. What are the chances treatment will be successful?
4. Would a clinical trial be appropriate for me?
5. What are the risks and possible side effects?
6. How long will treatment last?
7. Will it affect my normal activities?
8. What is the treatment likely to cost?
9. What is likely to happen without treatment?
10. How often will I need to have checkups?

Florida West Nile Virus Update

At the beginning of December 2002, the human cases of West Nile virus encephalitis has risen to 25, and 39 counties including Pinellas were under medical alert. Despite the weather being cooler during Florida's winter season and decreased mosquito activity, people need to continue being diligent about avoiding mosquito bites. The following precautionary measures are recommended:

- ◆ Avoid outdoor activities when mosquitoes are active, especially at dusk and dawn.
- ◆ If you must be outdoors at this time, cover up by wearing shoes, socks, long pants, etc.
- ◆ Apply repellent. For adults and children over 2 months old, the best protection is achieved by using mosquito repellent containing 30 percent DEET (N,N-Diethyl-meta-toluamide or N,N-diethyl-3-methylbenzamide) following manufacturer's directions. For children younger than 2 months, DEET is not recommended; use protective clothing and cover with mosquito netting.
- ◆ Eliminate stagnant water in birdbaths, ponds, and other receptacles in which mosquitoes might breed by emptying or changing. 

(This article is based on information contained in a Department of Health press release, 12/02/02.)

For more information regarding this newsletter, please contact:
Quality Management at the
Pinellas County
Health Department
(727) 824-6901

