



Jeb Bush
Governor

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Secretary, Department of Health

PINELLAS COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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What Every Woman Needs to Know

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month

Cervical cancer is cancer in the cervix, the lower, narrow part of the uterus (womb). The uterus is the hollow, pear-shaped organ where a baby grows during a woman's pregnancy. The cervix forms a canal that opens into the vagina (birth canal), which leads to the outside of the body.

Approximately 12,000 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer this year in the U.S. The good news is that this cancer is nearly 100 percent preventable and curable if it is found early.

Understanding Your Risk Factors

Your cervical cancer risk increases if:

- You have had an abnormal Pap test;
- You have never had a Pap test;
- You have had cancer in the past;
- You are a smoker;
- You have been infected with the human papillomavirus (HPV);
- You first had sex before age 16;
- Your mother took DES (Diethylstilbestrol), a hormonal drug, when she was pregnant with you;
- You have had many sexual partners;
- You use or have used non-barrier birth control method; or
- You are age 50 or older.

Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms

Many times, symptoms do not appear until the cancer has invaded nearby tissue. When this happens, the most common symptom is abnormal vaginal bleeding, such as bleeding or spotting between regular menstrual periods. Other signs can include:

- Bleeding after intercourse, douching, or after a pelvic exam;
- Menstrual bleeding that lasts longer or is heavier than usual;
- Bleeding after menopause; and
- Increased or unusual discharge from the vagina (separate from your normal monthly menstrual period).

It's important to note that these symptoms may be caused by cancer or by other health problems. For example, an infection can cause pain or bleeding. If you have any of these signs or other suspicious symptoms, you should see your health care professional right away. Ignoring symptoms may allow the cancer to progress to a more advanced stage and lower your chance for effective treatment.

Even better, don't wait for symptoms to appear. Have a regular Pap test and pelvic examination.

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Early Detection is the Key

There are ways you can protect yourself against cervical cancer. Most importantly, get a regular health check-up that includes a Pap test and pelvic exam. Most pre-cancerous conditions of the cervix can be detected with a Pap test and treated before cancer develops. A Pap test is a simple, painless test to detect abnormal cells in and around the cervix.

HPV causes almost all cases of cervical cancer. HPV is a common sexually transmitted virus that usually goes away by itself and rarely leads to cervical cancer. Most people with HPV never even know they have it. Ask your healthcare provider about screening for HPV.

Doctors recommend that women should be regularly screened for cervical cancer beginning three years after they start having sexual intercourse, but no later than age 21. Then screening should be done every year if your doctor uses a regular Pap test, or every two years if your doctor uses the newer liquid-based Pap test. Some women age 30 and older who have had three normal Pap tests in a row may need to be tested every two or three years.

Talk to your doctor about the screening schedule that is best for you, then follow through on that schedule.

For more information, visit www.cancer.org

NOTE: The Pinellas County Health Department has a FREE breast and cervical cancer screening program for qualifying women who are 50 to 64 years of age. The program includes breast and pelvic exam, Pap test and mammogram. For more information, call (727) 824-6917.

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The mission of the Pinellas County Health Department is to promote, protect and improve the health and safety of residents and visitors through public and private community efforts.
www.PinellasHealth.com