

## CERVICAL CANCER - 2006

The American Cancer Society estimates 12,800 new cases of cervical cancer annually in the United States with 4,600 deaths. Although endometrial and ovarian cancers are more common, great emphasis is placed on diagnosis and management of cervical cancer.

It is a disease that affects younger woman and has a "precancerous" phase that can be easily detected and therefore treated early.

Current understanding suggests that most cervical abnormalities leading to cancer result from infection with human papilloma virus (HPV), a widespread sexual infection.

No effective treatment exists for this virus and most women will clear it without any symptoms. Some will develop warts, while others will have precancerous changes called dysplasia. Warts are a treatable nuisance but untreated dysplasia can evolve into cancer.

Cervical dysplasia and cancer are readily detected by a Papanicolaou (pap) smear, a painless brushing of the cervix that provides an opportunity for early diagnosis. The American College of OB-GYN recommends annual pap smears for women who have been sexually active for 3 years and all women by 21. For some, the interval may be lengthened after three normal pap smears. Women who have had the cervix removed during a hysterectomy do not benefit from pap smears unless their surgery was done for cancer. An abnormal smear will prompt a recommendation for a follow up smear or a biopsy of the cervix, depending on the degree of abnormality.

Mild abnormalities confirmed by biopsy may resolve without treatment. More significant changes can be treated with cryosurgery (freezing), LEEP (wire loop excision of cervical tissue) or conization (removing a cone-shaped piece of the cervix). These procedures usually do not cause problems with childbearing. If invasive cancer of the cervix develops, required treatment becomes either an extended (radical) hysterectomy or a combination of radiation and chemotherapy. Most women with early stage cancer enjoy long term survival with adequate treatment.

No proven methods for prevention of cervical cancer exist. Early diagnosis of the precancerous stage through regular pap smears leads to relatively easy forms of effective treatment. The efficacy of the pap smear screening technique has been amply demonstrated.

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