

CERVICAL CANCER PREVENTION

At the beginning of the year, many women (and men) set resolutions around health and fitness, often focusing on weight loss. But one of the most important habits women can form revolves around regular health checks, particularly for preventable cancers.

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. Unfortunately, Kentucky ranks in the top 10 in the country for cervical cancer incidence and death rates – a dire statistic considering cervical cancer is largely preventable through vaccination and screening.

Risk-factors for cervical cancer

The human papillomavirus (HPV) causes virtually all cases of cervical cancers. The majority of sexually active women will be exposed to HPV at some point in their lifetime; fortunately, only 5 to 15 percent will develop cervical precancer. An even smaller percentage will develop cancer.

Other risk factors include multiple pregnancies, a long duration of birth control pill use, a history of other sexually transmitted diseases and tobacco use.

The importance of the HPV vaccine

Nowadays, you can take an extra step toward protecting your children against

cervical and other types of HPV-related cancers through the HPV vaccine. This vaccination used to be a three-dose process, the CDC now recommends that all 11 to 12 year-old children – girls and boys – get just two doses, with the second being given six to 12 months after the first.

Young women can get the vaccine through age 26, while young men can get vaccinated through age 21. Every year, more than 17,000 women and more than 9,000 men get cancer caused by an HPV infection.

Don't overlook getting a Pap smear

Cervical cancer screening – the Pap smear – is a regular appointment that is often overlooked. This test looks for cancerous cells on the cervix and can even find precancerous changes that have not yet developed into cancer.

Screenings usually begin at age 21 or three years after first sexual intercourse. Talk to your doctor about a timeline for regular screenings.

Cervical cancer symptoms

One reason the vaccine and screenings are so important is because cervical cancer often doesn't cause obvious symptoms until its more advanced stages. Some of the most common symptoms reported include

abnormal bleeding or bleeding after sexual intercourse, and an abnormal discharge. Many of these symptoms can be mistaken for less serious issues, such as a yeast infection or urinary tract infection.

As the cancer advances further, it can cause urinary blockage, back pain, leg swelling or neuropathic pain, such as a “pins and needles” sensation in the skin.