



## **Winning the Fight against Cervical Cancer**

By Jennifer Wider, MD

To date, cervical cancer is the only cancer known to be caused by a common virus called the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is the most common viral sexually transmitted disease in the United States. It can be passed through genital contact and during oral sex. It often causes no symptoms, leaving infected women unaware that they even have it. The good news is: most HPV infections are benign and will go away on their own.

At least 80 percent of women will acquire a HPV infection by the age of 50. Although the majority of HPV infections clear within one-to-two years, a small minority of these infections do not disappear spontaneously and can linger for years and later turn into cancer.

Statistics from the National Cervical Cancer Coalition estimate that 4,000 women in the United States die of cervical cancer each year and approximately 11,000 new cases will be detected during 2010.

In the vast majority of cases, these deaths could be prevented with early detection. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, cervical cancer is the easiest female cancer to prevent with regular screenings and follow-up.

The Pap and HPV DNA tests are responsible for dramatically lowering the number of cervical cancer deaths in the United States. These tests are designed to detect cell changes on the cervix and look for the virus that can trigger these cell changes.

High risk strains of HPV can cause cancer, "almost all squamous and adenocarcinoma are related to high-risk HPV infection," explains Francisco Garcia, MD, MPH, Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

Unleashing another weapon to fight cervical cancer, in June 2006, the US Food and Drug Administration approved the first vaccine to prevent cervical cancer. Currently, the vaccine is recommended for girls starting at the age of 11 or 12. It has been safely tested for girls and women between the ages of 9 and 26, and the recommendations may become expanded.

"The key is to get these girls immunized before they become sexually active," says Nina Karol, MD, an internist at Norwalk Hospital in Connecticut. She often cautions patients not to rely on the vaccine, "if they are sexually active, regular Pap smears are important to prevent cervical cancer as well."



Insurance status should not dissuade parents from getting the vaccine for their daughters. The federal *Vaccines for Children Program* provides free vaccines for children and teenagers under the age of 19.

Cervical cancer can be prevented,, but it is also important to utilize the proper screening tests and available preventative methods. Because the guidelines may vary from person to person, follow your doctor's recommendation for frequency based on your age, general health, and personal history of cervical cell changes or disease. You can also obtain information about the cervical cancer vaccine from your health care provider.

For additional information on the fight against cervical cancer visit the Partnership to End Cervical Cancer (PECC) at [www.nocervicalcancer.org](http://www.nocervicalcancer.org).

#### SOURCES

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