

Screening for HPV and cervical cancer can prevent serious disease

By Sheri Pope

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness month. Each year, more than 13,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with cervical cancer. In Montana, about 36 women are diagnosed annually, and nine will lose their life.

While the numbers may seem low in Montana, cervical cancer is a serious but preventable disease. Regular screenings can significantly reduce the risk of cervical cancer, the fourth leading cause of cancer in women globally.

Around 60% of women with cervical cancer did not follow recommended screening guidelines, studies from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show. Common reasons include a lack of awareness about risk factors, misunderstanding test results or they were uninsured. Stigma around cervical cancer also discourages women from discussing or sharing information.

When to start getting screened

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends cervical cancer screening starting at age 21 with a Pap test every three years. At age 30, screening should include both a Pap test and HPV testing every five years if results are normal. Most women do not need to test after the age of 65, considering regular screenings and the results of previous testing. Discuss your screening schedule with your doctor and decide together if you should discontinue screenings.

When a woman gets screened for cervical cancer the provider will insert a speculum into the vagina to show the cervix. The doctor will then use a small brush or swab to gently remove cells from the cervix. The cells are sent to a lab where they will be viewed under a microscope to look for abnormal cells that may become cancer, or are already cancer, and Human Papillomavirus (HPV).

If screening results show abnormalities, further tests like colposcopy or biopsy may be needed. In some cases, a Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure (LEEP) is used to diagnose and treat abnormal or cancerous cells in the cervix. Early detection can prevent invasive treatments, such as hysterectomy, or even death.

HPV and cervical cancer

While HPV is the primary cause of cervical cancer, women with HPV do not always develop cervical cancer with HPV. Other risk factors for cervical cancer include smoking tobacco, early sexual activity, a weakened immune system and family history. Men and women can be carriers of HPV.

HPV is also known to cause other types of cancers in adults, including cancers of the mouth, neck, head, throat, anus, and penis, affecting about 37,000 people in the U.S. each year. Genital warts are a low-risk form of HPV but are not cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine, approved by the FDA in 2006 under the brand name Gardasil-9, prevents many cancers caused by HPV, including cervical cancer. The CDC recommends youth get the vaccine between the ages of 11 and 12. It is a two-dose series given at six to twelve months apart. Studies show the vaccine reduces the risk of genital warts and other HPV-related conditions.

If you or someone you know needs a cervical cancer screening but cannot afford one, the Montana Cancer Screening Program can help. Electronic applications are available at: RiverStoneHealth.org/cancer-prevention. You are eligible if you are 21 or older, uninsured or underinsured and within 250% of the poverty level.

Cervical cancer is preventable. Screening, education, and vaccines are vital to reducing its impact.

Sheri Pope is a Prevention Health Specialist at Riverstone Health. For more information, call 406-247-3305 or email PublicHealth@RiverStoneHealth.org.