

Winning the battle against cervical cancer

Thanks to greater awareness and available vaccines, cervical cancer numbers have dropped in the last few decades.

By Wendy Teo, Obstetrician & Gynaecologist



Cervical cancer was once the leading cause of cancer death for women in the US. These days, however, the number of cases of cervical cancer and the number of deaths from it have decreased significantly, by about 50%. This is attributed to the widespread availability of pap smear for the screening of pre-cancerous changes in the cervix. Vaccine for the human papilloma virus (HPV) – a main risk factor for cervical cancer – has also reduced the incidence of the disease.

Who is at risk?

Cervical cancer, which occurs when cancerous cells multiply in the neck of the uterus, occurs in about 12 per 100,000 women aged 40 to 44. This incidence tapers down between the ages of 45 and 64 and peaks again at around the 65 to 69-year mark. Women who smoke, are overweight or whose diet is low in vegetables and fruit are at greater risk of getting cervical cancer. The risk is also increased in women who have been exposed to high-risk strains of HPV, who have a family history of cervical cancer, are immunosuppressed or have taken a drug called diethylstilbestrol (hormone medication given in the old days to prevent miscarriage).

The importance of screening

The lack of clear symptoms underscores the importance of regular screening. A pap smear is a screening test to check for changes in the cells of the cervix. It is a simple and painless procedure where cells are collected

from your cervix and sent to a laboratory for analysis. All woman aged between 25 and 69 years old who have ever had sex should do a pap smear once every three years.

In many cases, cervical cancer is only detected during routine pap smears. In late-stage cancers when the growth is larger, there may be irregular vagina bleeding, foul smelling discharge, pain or bleeding after intercourse, as well as abdominal pain. Other complications can arise if the tumour invades the bowel, bladder or spine and signs can include constipation, pain or blood in urine and or stools, severe back pain and increased need to urinate.

Get protected

One way to prevent cervical cancer is to get vaccinated against HPV. Two strains of this, Type 16 and 18, are responsible for causing 70% of all cervical cancers. The HPV vaccine can be administered from age nine to 26. The vaccine is given one and six months apart. Thus far, it has proven to be 100% effective in those who have not been previously infected with HPV 16 and 18.

While long-term studies are still ongoing, the vaccine has been shown to provide protection against persistent cervical HPV 16 and 18 infections for up to eight years.

Having said this, there are other HPV types that can cause cervical cancer, so even if you are HPV-vaccinated, a routine pap smear is still a very important part of maintaining good cervical health.



Dr Wendy Teo
Wendy Women's Clinic
38 Irrawaddy Road
#08-36/37/38/39
Mount Elizabeth Novena
Singapore 329563
Tel: 6100 9636

HP: 9118 9636 (Office Hours)
www.wendywomensclinic.com.sg