

January is Cervical Health Awareness Month!

Who Needs a Pap Test? – The New Cervical Cancer Screening Guidelines

Cervical cancer was once one of the most common causes of cancer death among women in the US. But since 1955, the number of deaths from cervical cancer has decreased by 60% as the result of the advent of the Pap test and institution of organized cervical cancer screening programs.

In November 2009, new guidelines for cervical cancer screening were issued by the American College of Obstetrics & Gynecology (ACOG).¹ Three main changes have been made in the guidelines that represent an update of guidelines issued in 2003: Age to begin screening, frequency of screening, and age to end screening.

Age to Begin Screening

Recommendations are to begin screening at age 21 and to avoid screening before that age. Cervical cancer is rare before the age of 21 and abnormal Pap tests can lead to invasive procedures that have been associated with adverse pregnancy outcomes.

Frequency of Screening

Although annual screening has been the standard practice, there is evidence to show that women with average level of risk do not require such frequent screening. Guidelines now recommend screening every 2 years for women 21-29 years and every 3 years after that for women who have had 3 consecutive tests that are normal.

Age to End Screening

Women between ages 65 and 70 who have had 3 consecutive tests that are normal within the last 10 years can discontinue cervical cancer screening. Women at older ages have very low risk of developing cervical cancer if they have received adequate screening in the past. For women with inadequate screening histories, screening should continue regardless of age.

Cervical cancer is a preventable disease that no woman should have to die from. One of the most important contributing factors to developing cervical cancer today is receiving inadequate screening in the past. However, more screening is not always better and to minimize the harms and maximize the benefits of screening, the focus should be on adhering to recommended guidelines. In addition, efforts should concentrate on providing services to unscreened and poorly screened women who account for over half of the cervical cancers that occur in the United States.

Free Screenings Available in Los Angeles County

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's Office of Women's Health provides appointments for free or low cost Pap tests to low income uninsured women via our multi-lingual hotline, **1-800-793-8090**. Services are available in seven languages, English, Spanish, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, Vietnamese and Armenian.

For more information on the **Office of Women's Health**, please visit our website: www.publichealth.org/owh or www.preventionmatters.org

For more information on cervical cancer, please click on the attached link from the **National Cervical Cancer Coalition**. http://newsinfusion.com/video_details.php?videoId=409#

¹ ACOG Practice Bulletin No. 109, December 2009