

## **January is Cervical Health Awareness Month**

### **The Main Cause of Cervical Cancer – HPV**

Infection with HPV or the *human papillomavirus* is the main cause of cervical cancer. HPV is a group of viruses that can infect the cervix. An HPV infection that doesn't go away can cause cervical cancer in some women. Although most HPV infections go away and do not result in cervical cancer, nearly all cervical cancers occur in the presence of HPV.

#### **How Common is HPV?**

About 20 million people 15-49 years of age in the US are currently infected with HPV and over 6 million people get newly infected each year. HPV is so common that 50% of women will get HPV within four years of onset of sexual activity and 80% will have it at some point in their lives. HPV infection is most prevalent among young adults with the rate peaking between 16 and 21 years for women. Risk factors for acquiring HPV among women include: multiple sexual partners, early onset of sexual activity, and a male partner that has had multiple sexual partners.

#### **How does HPV cause Cervical Cancer?**

Out of over 100 types of HPV, there are about 20 'high-risk' types that can cause cancer. When a cervix is first infected with one of these high risk HPV types, it can cause normal cells to become abnormal. However, in 90% of women, the HPV infection will become undetectable within 2 years and the abnormal cells go back to normal, therefore not requiring treatment. The remaining 10% of women are at risk for developing persistent HPV infections that are associated with cervical pre-cancer and cancer. Risk factors for developing persistent HPV infections and cervical cancer include smoking and immunosuppression from any cause.

#### **How can Cervical Cancer be prevented?**

On average, it takes 15-20 years for cervical cancer to develop from when a woman is first infected with HPV. This allows for time to detect abnormal changes in the cervix using the Pap test, and treating them before they progress to cancer. Getting routine Pap tests as recommended by their healthcare provider is the most important thing a woman can do to prevent cervical cancer.

#### **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](http://www.publichealth.org/owh) or [www.preventionmatters.org](http://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#](http://newsinfusion.com/video_details.php?videoId=409#)