

The Healthcare Consortium

For Your Health

“Preventing Cervical Cancer: The Importance of Screenings and Vaccinations”

January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. In this column we are partnering with the Greater Capital Region Cancer Services Program to share information about cervical cancer, how it can be prevented, and the importance of regular screening.

Cervical cancer is a type of cancer that begins in the cervix--the tunnel-like organ that connects the uterus and the vagina and allows fluids to enter and leave the uterus--and is most often found in women between the ages of 35 and 44. Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by the human papillomavirus, also known as HPV, the most common sexually transmitted disease in the United States that affects roughly 80% of sexually active people at some point in their lives. HPV is often asymptomatic and self-clearing, meaning it goes away by itself, but sometimes it will last longer and cause some cancers, including cervical cancer.

Happily, there are two extremely effective ways in which to prevent cervical cancer: screening and vaccination. Screening tests include the Pap test and the HPV test, both done in a health care provider's office. The Pap test, also called a pap smear or cervical cytology, looks for precancerous cells and the HPV test looks for the types of HPV that cause the most cases of cancer. The guidance for screening differs depending on age. Women who are ages 21 to 29 should have a Pap test every three years, while those who are 30 to 65 can choose to either have a Pap test every three years, a Pap test and HPV test together every five years, or an HPV test every five years. Regardless of the approach, regular and routine screening is key.

Also crucially important is vaccination against HPV. The HPV vaccine can prevent HPV and the cancers, like cervical cancer, that are caused by the virus. Children should begin the HPV vaccine series at age 9, and some adults can get the vaccine through age 45.

While nearly all cervical cancers can be prevented with regular screening and the HPV vaccine, unfortunately, screening and vaccination are not universal. More than half of all new cervical cancer cases occur in women who have never been screened or who have not been screened in the past five years, underscoring the importance of screening. Yet, in New York, 15% of females report they are not up to date with their cervical cancer screening.

The Greater Capital Region Cancer Services Program offers FREE cancer screening for eligible, uninsured New York residents, including cervical and breast cancer screening for people ages 40 and older and colorectal cancer screening for people ages 45 and older. If a screening finds something abnormal, follow-up diagnostic tests are available at no cost, and a case manager will guide individuals through the next steps. If cancer is found, treatment may be available at no cost, and the program can help with enrollment in the Medicaid

Cancer Treatment Program for those who qualify. Support is also available for needs that may get in the way of care, such as transportation, housing, food, or finding a health care provider.

This Cervical Cancer Awareness Month, we encourage everyone to speak with their healthcare provider about regular screening and the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. Early detection saves lives.

The Healthcare Consortium is a non-profit organization with a mission of improving access to healthcare and supporting the health and well-being of the residents in our rural community. The agency is located at 325 Columbia St. in Hudson. For more information: visit www.columbiahealthnet.org or call 518-822-8820.