Let’s Help Women Understand Gynecologic Cancers

We have heard again and again that women are eager for more information, not less. And they want to do everything they can to stay healthy.

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By Cynthia A. Gelb, director of CDC’s Inside Knowledge campaign

Once upon a time, women were told to get a Pap test every year. And most of us did, even though it wasn’t always clear why we were being tested. We just did what we were told and thought it was a surefire way to stay healthy. But times and recommendations have changed about what test to have, how often to have it, and the reason to have it.

Women Need More Information

Women are confused about their reproductive health. As the director of CDC’s Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer campaign, I get to hear what women think and know about the five most common GYN cancers: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar cancers.

We recently completed 21 focus groups in English and Spanish in three cities across the United States. We heard from 168 women, and every one of them knew they should get a Pap test. While most women correctly said the Pap test screens for cervical cancer, many mistakenly believed that the Pap also tests for ovarian and uterine cancers and other conditions. Further, the majority of women had never heard of the HPV (human papillomavirus) test, and had no idea if they had received it. And most believed that they should get a Pap test every year, even if their doctors advised them to wait longer or to stop getting screened altogether.

Just the Facts, Ma’am

These are the facts about screening for gynecologic cancers:

The Pap test is recommended to screen for cervical cancer. The other gynecologic cancers have no screening test. That’s why we advise women to listen to their bodies and see a doctor if they have unusual symptoms for 2 weeks or longer. And if they have vaginal bleeding after menopause, or after sex, or longer or heavier periods than are normal for them, women should see a doctor right away. Chances are it’s not cancer, but it’s important to find out what’s causing symptoms.

Two tests are recommended to help prevent cervical cancer or find it early, when treatment works best:

- The Pap test (or Pap smear) looks for cell changes on the cervix that might become cervical cancer if they are not treated appropriately.
- The HPV test looks for the virus that can cause these cell changes.

If you're 21 to 29 years old, have a Pap test. If the result is normal, you can get your next Pap in 3 years.

When you turn 30, you have testing options. You can choose to get:

- A Pap test only. If your result is normal, you can wait 3 years until your next Pap test.
- An HPV test only. This is called primary HPV testing. If your result is normal, you can wait 5 years until your next screening test.
- An HPV test along with the Pap test. This is called co-testing. If both of your results are normal, you can wait 5 years until your next screening test.

You can stop getting screened for cervical cancer when you turn 65 and you've had normal screening test results for several years, or if your cervix was removed as part of a total hysterectomy for non-cancerous conditions, like fibroids.

If You Have Female Patients…

If you are a health care provider, please help your patients understand that they have screening test options. Please let them know what test they're getting, what it screens for, and how long they can wait before doing it again. We have heard again and again that women are eager for more information, not less. And they want to do everything they can to stay healthy. Maybe one day soon we will be able to say, "Once upon a time, women were confused about gynecologic cancers. But not anymore."

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