Know Your Body. Know Your Family History.

Recognizing the warning signs of gynecologic cancers can save your life—treatment is most effective when these cancers are found early.

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During September, National Gynecologic and Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, we encourage women to know their bodies, so they can recognize if they are having symptoms that need to be checked out.

Gynecologic cancers are cancers that affect women. They include cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal and vulvar cancers. There is no screening test recommended for any gynecologic cancer except for cervical cancer. Knowing your own body, recognizing that something may be wrong, and seeing a doctor may be lifesaving.

It's also important to know your family medical history. This gives you important clues in finding out if you have an increased chance of developing certain cancers, including ovarian, uterine, breast, and colorectal cancers. Sharing your family history with your doctor can help prevent, detect, and manage these cancers.

Having several close relatives with a history of breast, ovarian, uterine, or colorectal cancers may suggest that you could benefit from genetic counseling. Consider this:

- Women with Hereditary Breast and Ovarian Cancer (HBOC) syndrome have an increased risk for breast, ovarian, and several other cancers. People with this syndrome have mutations (changes) in their BRCA1 or BRCA2 genes. In addition to increasing risk for breast and ovarian cancers, mutations in BRCA1 and BRAC2 also increase risk for fallopian tube, peritoneal, and pancreatic cancers in women, as well as prostate cancer in men.

- Similarly, women with Lynch syndrome are at increased risk for uterine, colorectal, and ovarian cancers. Usually, people with Lynch syndrome have close relatives who were diagnosed with these cancers, most often before age 50.

If you think you have an increased risk for these cancers, talk to your doctor and discuss whether genetic counseling is right for you. Once you see a genetic counselor, together you can decide if genetic testing makes sense. In genetic testing, your saliva or blood is examined to see if you have genetic changes that place you at a higher risk for cancer than other women.

You can learn a lot more about family history and cancer (particularly gynecologic, breast, and colorectal cancers) by checking out a brand new fact sheet from CDC's Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer campaign. Along with urging women to know their family history, the Inside Knowledge campaign encourages you to:

- Pay attention to your body and know what is normal for you. Gynecologic cancers have warning signs. When gynecologic cancers are found early, treatment is most effective.
- If you have vaginal bleeding that is unusual for you because of when it occurs or how heavy it is, see a doctor right away.
- If you notice any other unexplained signs or symptoms that last for two weeks or longer, see a doctor.
- Get tested regularly to find cervical cancer early or precancerous problems that if treated prevent cervical cancer.
- Consider getting the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine if you are in the age group for which it is recommended.

Please, pay attention to your body and to your family medical history, this September and all through the year.

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