New Options to Screen for HPV, Which Causes Cervical Cancer

The FDA has approved HPV self-collection screening options in health care settings. At-home tests may be on the horizon.

May 22, 2024 By Laura Schmidt

Women will soon have easier—and more private—options to screen for human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes almost all cases of cervical cancer, as well as anal cancer, some oral cancers and other malignancies. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved two self-collection methods that allow women to use vaginal swabs to gather samples in a health care setting, such as their primary care doctor's office, a pharmacy or an urgent care facility. The self-collected samples are then sent to a lab for evaluation.

The FDA has approved self-collection methods of screening for HPV by Roche and by BD (Becton, Dickinson and Company), reports The Washington Post.

What's more, an at-home collection method by Teal Health may receive FDA approval later this year, according to the newspaper.

The newly approved HPV self-collection solutions offer a convenient screening option for people who may have limited access to preventive cancer care; what's more, they are also much less intrusive than Pap smears.

We are proud to break down barriers and increase the accessibility of HPV screenings to help prevent cervical cancer with our HPV self-sampling test, which empowers women to take their own samples for testing.#RocheFinancialResults #hpv #cervicalcancerhttps://t.co/fztO69sb6T

pic.twitter.com/MqQWDlFc5q

— Roche (@Roche) July 22, 2022

The American Cancer Society (ACS) applauded the FDA approvals. “Almost all cervical cancers are caused by persistent infection with certain types of HPV,” ACS CEO Karen Knudsen, MBA, PhD, said in a news release. “Self-collection can expand access to screening and reduces barriers, which will give more people the opportunity to detect, treat and ultimately survive cancer.”

"Despite the benefits of cervical cancer screening, not all women and people with a cervix get screened regularly,” added William Dahut, MD, chief scientific officer at ACS. “Most cervical cancers are found in people who have never had a cervical cancer screening test or who have not had one recently. That’s why adding self-collection in a health care center as a screening method for this potentially deadly disease can make a huge impact.”

Early detection and treatment of cervical cancer increases the likelihood of long-term survival.

Despite the benefits of cervical cancer screening, many people do not participate in routine screening. In fact, more than half of people diagnosed with cervical cancer in the United States have never been screened or have only been screened infrequently, according to the National Cancer Institute.

Barriers to screening include limited access to care, cost and modesty.

Cervical cancer is the one of the most common malignancies in women worldwide, and it is a leading cause of cancer-related death for women in developing countries.

Cervical cancer is typically diagnosed in middle-aged women, and it is seldom seen in women younger than age 20. About 20% of cases occur in women over 65.

Although cervical cancer is relatively uncommon in the United States thanks to HPV vaccines, routine screening with HPV tests and Pap smears, which can detect abnormal precancerous cells and allow for early treatment, about 13,820 U.S. women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer this year, according to the ACS.

With vaccinations, innovative diagnostic tools and screening programs, achieving the [World Health Organization’s] goal of eliminating cervical cancer by 2030 is within reach,” said Roche Diagnostics CEO Matt Sause in a news release. “Our HPV self-collection solution helps support this goal by reducing barriers and providing access to HPV screening by allowing people to privately collect their own sample for HPV testing.”

To learn more, click #HPV and #Cancer Screening or read Cancer Health’s Basics on Cervical Cancer. It reads in part:

What are the risk factors for cervical cancer?

The main cause of cervical cancer is HPV infection. There are more than 100 types of HPV, but only about a dozen types are considered high risk, or cancer-causing. Two types in particular, 16 and 18, are responsible for about a majority of all cervical cancers. HPV is commonly spread through sexual contact, but this can also occur through nonsexual skin-to-skin contact.

Cervical cancer and other cancers linked to HPV infection can be prevented with vaccines. A vaccine that protects against nine HPV types is recommended for adolescents at ages 11 or 12, and it is approved for women and men up to age 45. Regular HPV screening and Pap tests can detect abnormal changes in cervical cells, allowing for treatment that prevents progression to invasive cancer.

What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer often does not cause any signs or symptoms during its early stages. Many women with cervical disease do not develop symptoms until later stages, after the cancer grows into surrounding tissues and organs, a process known as metastasis.

Symptoms that might suggest cervical cancer but could also be due to other health conditions should be checked out by a health care provider, including:

- Increased vaginal discharge
- A change in the color or odor of vaginal discharge
- Vaginal bleeding between periods
- Vaginal bleeding after menopause
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Bleeding after sex
- Difficulty urinating or loss of bladder control.

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