

DOH recognizes January as Cervical Cancer Awareness Month

Written by Staff Reports
Friday, 05 January 2024 00:00



SANTA FE — January is Cervical Cancer Awareness Month and an opportunity to raise awareness about how people can protect themselves by getting screened. Cervical cancer screenings can help detect abnormal (changed) cells early, before they turn into cancer. Most deaths from cervical cancer could be prevented by regular screenings and follow-up care.

Cervical cancer starts in the cervix, which is the lower, narrow end of the uterus. Everyone with a uterus is at risk of cervical cancer, but it occurs most often in individuals over the age of 30 years old.

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by the Human Papilloma Virus. HPV is a common virus, and at least half of sexually active people will have HPV at some point in their lives. If the HPV infection does not resolve on its own, there is a chance that over time it may develop into cervical cancer.

“Screening is important because there are usually no signs or symptoms of early cervical cancer, but it can be detected through regular cervical cancer screenings,” the Chief Medical Officer at the New Mexico Department of Health Miranda Durham, MD, explained. “According to a study by the American Cancer Society millions of people in the U.S. missed critical cancer screening tests during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic. New Mexicans can do their part to help prevent cervical cancer by scheduling their screening appointment soon.”

Cervical cancer screening is highly effective in detecting abnormal cells in the cervix and cervical cancer is easily treatable if caught early.

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Over the past 30 years in New Mexico, deaths from cervical cancer have continued to decline at a rate of 1.2% annually from 1990-2020, likely due to use of the Pap test – including through organized screening projects. New cases of cervical cancer also declined in New Mexico by 2.4% per year from 1992-2009.

Screening can find a change in the cervix early when it is easier to treat and before cancer has developed. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends the following options for cervical cancer screening:

For people ages 21-29 years a Pap test alone every three years.

For people ages 30-65 years, an HPV test alone every five years with or without a Pap test, or a Pap test alone every three years.

Although cervical cancer screening can prevent the disease, there will still be more than 80 New Mexicans diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer this year, and about 27 cervical cancer deaths. The DOH Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program supports cervical cancer screening for those ages 21-65 years. The risk of cervical cancer may be higher for people who:

Have an HPV infection that does not go away on its own.

Were sexually active at a young age/having many sexual partners.

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To reduce the risk of cancer, HPV vaccination is recommended for preteens ages 11-12 years. The HPV vaccine can be given up until age 26 and can be started as young as nine years old. Vaccination is recommended for everyone in this age range to help prevent the spread of HPV and reduce the risk of HPV-related cancers in the future.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the HPV vaccine has the potential to prevent more than 90% of HPV-attributable cancers. Regular cervical cancer screening is recommended even for those who have received the HPV vaccine.

If the cost of cervical cancer screening is a concern, New Mexicans can call the DOH BCC Program's toll-free hotline at 1-833-525-1811 to find a participating medical provider in their area. New Mexicans with low income and little or no insurance, and who are women (including transgender women and men) may be eligible for a free mammogram or cervical cancer screening. Our hotline provides services in English, Spanish and other languages.

More information about the New Mexico BCC Program is available at:

<https://www.nmhealth.org/about/phd/pchb/bcc> .

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