Dear Alice,

I am not having much success finding info about cervical cancer online; can you advise?

Answer

Dear Reader,

With the abundance of resources that exist online, it may be difficult to find accurate information. Fortunately, Go Ask Alice! can do some of the work for you! To start with the basics, the cervix is the lower part of the uterus, which connects to the vagina. Cancer of this body part has been linked to the human papillomavirus (HPV), of which types 16 and 18 cause approximately 70 percent of cases of cervical cancer. In most cases, the immune system works to inhibit the virus from harming the cervical cells over time, but sometimes HPV may cause the cells to become abnormal or cancerous.

There are certain factors that increase an individual’s risk of contracting HPV, which may also increase the chances of developing cervical cancer. These risk factors include having multiple sexual partners, early initiation of sexual activity, contraction of sexually transmitted infections (such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, or human immunodeficiency virus), having a weak immune system, and cigarette smoking.

If detected early, cervical cancer is often curable, which is why it’s critical to get screened regularly. Screening helps to prevent the development of cervical cancer and to initiate treatment early. The two types of screenings are the Pap test (also known as the Pap smear) and the HPV test. Both tests are available through a health care provider. The screening recommendations for those with a cervix as indicated by the American Cancer Society (ACS) [2], American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists [3], and United States Preventive Services Task Force [4] include:

- Under 30: begin screening at age 21 with a Pap test, rescreen with a Pap test every three years until age 29
- 30 to 65: Pap test combined with an HPV test every five years until age 65; or every three years with just the Pap test
- Over 65: discontinue screening at age 65 if they've had regular screening in the previous
ten years and no serious pre-cancers found in the last 20 years

In addition to age, individuals at higher risk of cervical cancer may be encouraged to get screened more frequently. Those with abnormal cervical screening results may need to have a follow-up Pap test done in six months or a year. If someone assigned female at birth has a total hysterectomy (removal of the uterus and cervix) they probably no longer need to be screened, unless the hysterectomy was done as a treatment for cervical pre-cancer or cancer. If the individual had a hysterectomy without removal of the cervix (called a supra-cervical hysterectomy) it’s recommended that they continue cervical cancer screening according to the standard screening guidelines.

To reduce the risk of contracting HPV, individuals between the ages of 9 and 45 can get vaccinated. This series of shots allows for protection against multiple strains of HPV that are highly associated with cervical cancer. However, it’s recommended that those who have been vaccinated still follow the general screening guidelines. For more information, check out the American Cancer Society’s page on cervical cancer and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website on the HPV vaccination. The ACS also has an extensive list of links to other reliable information sources.

Hope this provides you with some clarity on cervical cancer!

Alice!

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