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## Cervical cancer stalks Latino

**Level of incidence is 12%, compared with 8% overall**

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If Marta Flores had had health insurance and access to screening for cancer, his prognosis would be more encouraging. For several weeks he went to different hospitals, emergency rooms and clinics in Los Angeles, but his lack of a health insurance policy or \$ 40,000 prevented receive treatment that would have prevented thrombosis and the lungs fill with fluid.

"I know my body and I knew something was wrong. The stomach (abdomen) was swollen, I felt weak and my whole body felt weird," said Marta a day after he received a dose of chemotherapy.

Marta's case occurs frequently not only in Los Angeles, but across the state. Thousands of Hispanic women in California are being diagnosed with cervical cancer. The only type of cancer that is preventable (shots), detectable (Papanicolaou) and treatable with either surgery, chemotherapy or radiation.

According to official figures state Department of Public Health, the incidence rate of cervical cancer in Latinas is 12%, while that of the general population is 8%.

In the county of Los Angeles is even greater. Almost twice that of white women, 14% in Latin versus 8% in the general population. The mortality rate is also nearly double, from 3.9% compared with 2%.

Dr. Victoria Cortessis, who runs a program to prevent cervical cancer in the public hospital known as LAC-USC General Hospital, said they are doing their best to take Pap tests to uninsured women in the county.

"We're seeing young Latinas, some of childbearing age are coming to hospital with advanced cases of cervical cancer. This is a shame because cervical cancer can be detected with a simple, but what we're seeing is not attending Latinas to be tested even though it's free in many places," said Dr. Cortessis.

In the case of Marta, she went to different places. In November last year began their journey by clinics and hospitals. His first stop was at a clinic for low-income people near his home in Bell. There he said that did not have the technology to make the tests required and warned that surely had peritonitis.

"I was sent to Harbor Hospital [Harbor UCLA Medical Center, a public hospital]," says Marta, who was told he would mail a written reference. But his condition worsened.

Martin then turned to a private hospital in Downey, where he was diagnosed with cancer.

"I asked if he had MediCal (public health insurance for poor families), I told them no. Then I asked if he had \$ 40,000 ... my answer was the same: no. Then they told me to go home and I would make an appointment to the Harbor Hospital," said Marta.

About 10 days later, when her situation worsened, she decided to go to another community clinic in Los Angeles, where he immediately realized the gravity of their situation and called the emergency system.

Martin was taken to the nearest hospital. This medical center was private and after several hours in the emergency room was taken to General Hospital.

"When I came to the county hospital and had fluid in the lungs and had thrombosis (blood clots in the brain), but there have treated me very well. Now I'm getting chemotherapy," said Marta with high hopes of beating the cancer. "We're hoping to get smaller tumors with chemotherapy so that they can draw."

According to the Foundation of the California Medical Association (CMA Foundation), Latinas are more likely to die from cervical cancer than the rest of the population.

In Los Angeles County the situation is even worse than the rest of the state. The level of incidence and mortality is 3.3% higher than the national average. The areas where there are more deaths are in the East Los Angeles (5.1%) and south of the city (4.6%), predominantly Latino areas.

Dr. Theresa Loya, county pathologist who conducted a privately funded independent research among patients MLK Medical Center in South Los Angeles, found that Latino and African American women die quicker and younger than the other women.

"Many have no health insurance or access to preventive health services. This is a problem here in America and around the world. Until the SEER (NCI) is recognized as the leading cause of cancer death in women nationally and internationally," said Dr. Loya.

To help women with cancer, the health worker Norma Valencia, together with Marta, has created a support group for Latinas with cancer. The group meets every Thursday in Pico Rivera.

"Many of the women in the support group are uninsured and have had to fight alone for help. Now you are

not alone. Now they help each other and are creating programs to help them cope with the symptoms of chemotherapy as yoga," said Valencia.

Esther Arias McDowell, Office of Women's Health County of Los Angeles, said there is a hotline that connects uninsured Latinos with health care providers.

"There are resources available to help women get the Pap smear [Papanicolaou] free to treat the disease before it is too late," he said Arias McDowell.

Each year in the United States are detected about 12.200 new cases of invasive cervical cancer and about 4,200 people die, according to statistics from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

#### LEARN

What is cervical cancer?

Cancer that forms in tissues of the cervix or neck of the uterus, ie the passage that connects the uterus with the vagina.

What causes cervical cancer?

Scientific studies have shown that human papillomavirus (HPV) is present in 99% of cervical cancer tumors.

What is HPV?

HPV is a common virus that affects the skin and mucous membranes. This virus is so common that it is estimated that over 90% of people who have had sex have been exposed to this virus, but 85% get rid of the infection without medical intervention. The highest rate of genital infection occurs in adults between 18 and 28.

Is there a vaccine available?

There are two recommended vaccinations for girls from 9 years old to 26 years for women. Cervarix and Gardasil, from both HPV infections by 60% to 78% approximately. These vaccines are free for people with health insurance or have a cost of \$ 120 per dose (three doses required).

#### RESOURCES

- Toll Free County of Los Angeles 800-793-8090
- Planned Parenthood Los Angeles 888-633-0433
- Cancer Screening Program 800-511-2300 Every Woman Counts
- FamilyPACT 800-942-1054
- Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Program 800-824-0088

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