

Latinas At High Risk for Cervical Cancer, But Avoid Getting Screened



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"Death is a part of our culture," Miriam Reyes, a reporter with the Spanish newspaper Impulso, said at a recent Los Angeles gathering on cervical cancer. Reyes, a native of Monterrey, Mexico, had gone to her doctor's office the previous day. When her doctor asked her when her last exam had been, Reyes couldn't remember. "Few of us Latinos get screened for any kind of cancer," she explained.

She found it ironic that she was now at a meeting intended to prevent women like her from dying of a preventable disease that disproportionately affects Latinas.

The meeting, organized by the California Medical Association (CMA) Foundation's California Cervical Cancer Free Campaign, aimed to identify the challenges of delivering the message of the risks of cervical cancer to Latinas, and motivate them to get screened and vaccinated against the virus that can cause cervical cancer.

Los Angeles County has the highest cervical cancer mortality rate in the state among Latinas. Citing cultural norms and an aversion to discussing issues related to sex, the CMA Foundation found that Latinas don't get screened as much as other women: Ten percent of California Latinas have never had a Pap test and 30 percent have not had one in the past three years. A wide cross-section of health care providers, advocates, and representatives of leading Latino media outlets discussed how they could work together to promote awareness to Latina women in L.A.

Dr. Diana Ramos of the Los Angeles County Dept. of Public Health explained that in the United States, 80 percent of men and women are exposed to the human papillomavirus (HPV) by the age of 50. There are more than 100 strains of HPV and most HPV infections go away on their own, but some can lead to cervical cancer in women.

A woman can be infected with HPV for years before there are any changes in the cervix or any symptoms. If diagnosed in the first three stages, cervical cancer is highly curable. In the late stage, there may be symptoms such as bleeding and abdominal pain, and the prognosis can be fatal.

The only way to detect HPV for a woman is through a Pap smear, where a sample of cells from the cervix is examined for any changes. It's recommended that women get their first Pap smear three years after intercourse or at age 21 if they have not had sex. HPV is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, and can infect the cervix, rectum, mouth, or throat. It is a concern not only for women, but also for men.

To prevent HPV infection, doctors recommend vaccinating girls and boys before they become exposed to the virus, starting as young as age 9. Cervarix and Gardasil are the two vaccines available that are given in three shots over a 6-month period. The vaccines reduce the probability of cervical cancer by 70 percent.

Local groups say the message is most effective when it is not linked to sex. Elissa Mass, vice president of programs for the CMA Foundation, says the message should be: "Cervical cancer screening is about family health and a part of a woman's health and wellbeing."

Reyes agrees with this approach. "Once you are educated," she said, "you don't want to suffer or have a family member die because you know there is a way to prevent it, and you will make the effort to take care of yourself."

That was the hope of everyone in the meeting -- that the message would help all women see the value of exams and screenings.

Cervical cancer screenings are available free for low-income women through California's federally funded Every Woman Counts program and other programs. Each of the three HPV vaccine doses is covered by insurance and by the Vaccines for Children program for young women and girls.

For more information and to schedule your screening, please call 1-800-793-8090.

Comments

Anonymous

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Posted 4 days ago

I have HPV and I am an engineer who works for the largest STD dating and support site positivefish.com. I have to tell you a secret, you can choose not to believe me. But the truth is that this site has more than 1,880,000 members and about 80% members are good looking.

Unfortunately, STD rates soar worldwide and most people with STDs don't even know that they have them. So do use a condom to protect yourself!!!!

The government should grant more money for STD education to lower the rates of STD transmission.

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