

## **Cervical Cancer Screenings**

Each year, more than 12,000 women in the United States learn they have cervical cancer and nearly 4,000 women die from the disease. These numbers have dropped over the past 40 years, largely due to more women having regular Pap tests to check for cervical cancer.

The cervix is the lower, narrow part of the uterus. Cancer of the cervix occurs when cells begin to grow abnormally – dividing at a faster than normal rate. The human papillomavirus (HPV) causes most cases of cervical cancer. Women who smoke, have HIV, reduced immunity or who don't get regular Pap tests from their doctors are more likely to develop cervical cancer.

Women are more likely to become infected by HPV if they have multiple sexual partners. HPV, which is a type of sexually transmitted disease, is spread through vaginal or anal contact with an infected person. You can have the HPV virus without having any symptoms.

A vaccine, Gardasil®, has been developed to prevent spread of the HPV virus. Doctors may recommend the vaccine for females between the ages of 9 and 26. The vaccine must be given in three doses over a six-month period.

### **Who Needs to Be Screened?**

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) has issued recommendations for cervical cancer screenings. The guidelines state that women aged 21-65 should be screened every three years. After age 30, women can start being screened every five years instead<sup>i</sup>.

After age 65, women who have had three negative tests in a row should talk to their doctors about stopping the Pap tests. Women who have had a hysterectomy for benign reasons do not need to continue screenings.

### **The Pap Test**

The Pap test or Pap smear checks for changes in the cells of the cervix. Samples of the cells from inside and outside of the cervix are taken during a pelvic exam by your doctor or nurse.

You should not have a Pap test during your period because it is harder to detect abnormal cells. Other activities can alter the results of your test, so two days before the exam you should not:

- Have sex
- Use tampons
- Douche
- Use vaginal lubrication

- Insert creams, suppositories, or medication into the vagina
- Use vaginal sprays or powders

After your Pap test, your doctor's office will let you know the test results and whether any other tests will be required.

The offices of Brookwood Baptist Health Primary and Specialty Care Network are here for you! Call 205-882-7619 to find a physician today!

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