Cervical cancer was once the leading cause of cancer death for women in the United States. Now it is the most preventable of all of the female cancers. Yet cervical cancer affects women of color and their communities more than their white counterparts.

The Pap test—which looks for abnormal changes in a woman’s cervix—has helped decrease the number of women in the U.S. with cervical cancer by about 75% in the past 50 years. However, women of color are diagnosed with cervical cancer at a later stage than white women. Black women are more likely to die from cervical cancer than women of other races or ethnicities, possibly because of decreased access to Pap testing or follow-up treatment.

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by a persistent infection with human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is so common that almost everyone who is sexually active will be infected with HPV sometime in his or her life. Most of the time the infection goes away, but sometimes HPV infections cause changes in the cells that can lead to cancer.

But the good news is, about 70% of the HPV infections that cause cervical cancer can be prevented with vaccination. HPV vaccination has the potential to reduce cervical cancer deaths around the world by as much as two-thirds. HPV vaccine can decrease cervical cancer rates across the country and help to improve the health of women of color in your community.

Dr. Iyabode Beysolow, a pediatrician in the Immunization Services Division at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), tells us “We have an entire generation of girls we could protect against cervical cancer. What most parents might not realize is that every year 12,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 4,000 die. If we can protect girls now with HPV vaccine, we could drastically reduce these numbers in the future.”

HPV infection is also responsible for other cancers that aren’t as common but are still very serious. HPV causes genital cancers (vulva, vagina, penis, anus) and a type of head and neck cancer called oropharyngeal cancer (cancer of the back of throat including base of tongue and tonsils). There aren’t any regular screening programs for these cancers, which means that HPV vaccine is even more important for prevention.

There are many ways to reduce your risk for HPV-related cancer:

- Get the HPV vaccine for boys and girls when they are 11 or 12 years old: Almost everyone gets exposed HPV at some time—getting all 3 doses of HPV vaccine can help prevent infection.
- For adult women, it’s important to see your doctor regularly and get Pap tests when your doctor recommends it: Screening is very important to help reduce the chances of late-stage cervical cancer. In fact, 3 in 5 cervical cancers occur in women who have never received a Pap test or have not been tested in the past five years.
- Follow up with your doctor if your Pap test results are not normal: Cervical cancer can usually be cured when it is found and treated early.
Matte Article from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- If your doctor says that you have cervical cancer, ask to be referred to a doctor who specializes in treating cancers like this. *This doctor will work with you to create a plan for treatment and follow up.*
- And help spread the word: *Tell your friends and family that HPV vaccine is cancer prevention.*

As Dr. Beysolow reminds us, “With HPV vaccine, we really have the power to protect young girls from cervical cancer going forward. Unless we take advantage of the tools available to us, including the very effective and safe vaccines that are now available, we will fail to prevent these diseases.”

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