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Pap Smears & the Gardasil Vaccine

The Papanicolaou test



The Papanicolaou test, or as it's fondly known, the pap smear, induces sighs of dread and resignation in most women. Today, nearly every woman is aware of the testing, but few may realize what the test actually does or its important place in the history of progress for women's health.



Pap smear testing was developed by cytopathology pioneer Dr. Papanikolaou in the 1920s. At the time, cervical cancer was a real fear for women and a major cause of death in the United States. It wasn't until the 1950s that the testing's importance and benefit became truly recognized and routinely performed. But, Pap Smear testing has since reduced incidence and death rates from cervical cancer by more than 80%!

The Way it Works



The cervix is the impressively muscular doorway of the uterus. This is what safely holds a pregnancy inside the uterus and opens or dilates during labor to allow for birth. During a pelvic exam, a device called a speculum is inserted into the vaginal canal to enable the doctor to evaluate and properly reach the cervix with a small brush. This brush is swiped across the cervix to collect cells that are sent to a lab for analysis.

Because precancerous cells can be detected before malignant lesions develop, women can be treated and cured before ever receiving a cancer diagnosis. The most common symptom of cervical cancer is abnormal vaginal bleeding in a sexually active woman.

The Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Virtually all (99%) of cases of cervical cancer are linked to HPV infection. HPV is sexually transmitted, has many different strains (more than 150), is highly prevalent in the population (it is estimated that more than two-thirds of Americans carry an HPV infection), and may lie dormant for long periods of time, up to 10-20 years.



Risk factors for Cervical cancer are related to the number of lifetime sexual partners who may expose you to the HPV virus and to cigarette smoking, which lowers the body's ability to fight the virus. Women with a weakened immune system from chronic medical illness may also be more susceptible to the virus. Using barrier contraceptives with spermicide, limiting the number of sexual partners and practicing abstinence will reduce the risk of cervical cancer. Discuss with your provider how frequently you should be screened for HPV and have a Pap Smear performed.

The HPV Vaccine



The HPV vaccination effectively protects against genital warts, vulvar and vaginal precancerous lesions, cervical precancerous lesions, and cervical cancer related to HPV types covered by the vaccine. But unfortunately, the HPV vaccine had a rocky introduction to society. Some of the contributing factors for a late consistent adoption were the ideas that only women needed vaccination and only if they were

sexually promiscuous. Few parents want to think of their children as sexual beings and the stigma of premarital sex and a false sense of safety in eventual monogamous marital sex prevented many from agreeing to vaccinate. Due to the highly contagious nature of HPV and long-term dormancy rates, the vaccine is designed to be administered prior to the onset of sexual activity. There is no cure for this virus once it has been contracted.

Gardasil (the leading HPV vaccine series) stepped into the scene right after the question of vaccination safety began becoming more mainstream due to the widespread publicizing of a group of 36 parents claiming their children had adverse reactions to the DTP vaccine. Despite a thorough investigation and no evidence linking the children's conditions to the vaccination, vaccine rates fell.

It wasn't until after a number of children died during three major epidemics of whooping cough that vaccine rates again began to rise.

Any medication or vaccination may come with some risk of allergic reaction or mild side effects. However, the HPV vaccine has been thoroughly tested for safety by the CDC, FDA, and many other organizations around the world. Over 90 million doses have been

administered in the United States alone and strict guidelines require the reporting and close monitoring of any and all reactions. The vaccination series is FDA approved for both boys and girls at age 9 years and is offered through insurance up until age 26. Recent studies and expanded FDA guidelines have prompted insurance companies to now cover women up until the age of 45. You should discuss with your provider or pediatrician what the appropriate age is to initiate the vaccine series and whether your insurance covers you after the age of 26 if you did not previously receive it.



Often, by the time obvious symptoms of disease arise, many patients are looking at a long and difficult path for treatment and recovery. Thanks to modern medicine, we are offered great opportunities to defeat disease before it happens! Being informed and up-to-date with your preventative care is important for a happy and healthy life.

Long after Dr. Papanicolaou's death in 1968, one admiring author wrote "His monumental contribution proved that cancer can be beaten... the Papanicolaou screening test will remain one of the most powerful weapons against this disease. Those of us who looked upon him as a guiding star will always owe him our gratitude, and those women who were helped by his test owe him their lives." These tools may be considered uncomfortable or a necessary evil, but modern women are truly privileged to have the opportunity to stop cancer in its tracks.



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