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Commonly Asked Questions and Responses: Cervical Cancer Screening Services

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Commonly Asked Questions and Responses about Cervical Cancer Screening Services

What is cancer of the cervix?

The cervix is located in the lowest part of uterus and is sometimes called the mouth of the womb. Cancer of the cervix happens when the cells at the opening of the uterus become abnormal and start to grow out of control. If not detected early through screening, the abnormal cells may lead to cancer of the cervix.

What causes cancer of the cervix?

The primary cause of cancer of the cervix is human papillomavirus, or HPV, which is usually sexually transmitted. There are many HPV types, but the two types commonly associated with cancer of the cervix are type 16 and 18.

Who is at risk of HPV infection?

Anyone who has engaged in sexual relations is at risks of getting the HPV infection. Both men and women can get the HPV infection.

How can adult women prevent cancer of the cervix?

All women above 25 years, who have ever been sexually active, need screening to go for regular check-ups for cancer of the cervix. This will help to detect signs early enough and get effective treatment.

Apart from results from a cervical cancer screening exam, are there other signs and symptoms to indicate a woman has cervical cancer?

HPV develops without signs or symptoms, but can lead to precancerous changes and many years later to cervical cancer. Most women who have HPV infection and/or precancerous lesions have no signs or symptoms.

At advanced stage of cervical cancer, there are some common signs:

- Smelly discharge from vagina that does not improve with treatment for normal infection.
- Bleeding after sex
- Bleeding between menstruation periods or after menopause.
- Discharge from vagina that comes unexpectedly.
- Pain in the pelvis or waist

Why are only women aged 25-49 recommended for VIA screening to prevent cervical cancer?

Women in their 30's and 40's are most likely to develop changes on their cervix that could progress to cancer, if not treated. These changes can be seen visually once vinegar has been applied to the cervix, as part of a VIA exam. Even though women in their teens and early 20's that are sexually active are at risk of HPV infection, they are still at low risk for developing changes on their cervix since it takes several years for precancerous changes to develop. In

women 50 years and older, the part of the cervix where the precancerous changes occur becomes difficult to see.

What can women over 50 do to prevent cervical cancer if VIA screening is not appropriate?

Women over 50 years can be referred for Pap smear screening, where available.

Will the VIA exam hurt?

The exam may sting or be a little uncomfortable, but it will not be painful.

I am embarrassed. Do I really need this exam?

Yes. You have made a wise decision to protect your health. Even if you are embarrassed or ashamed, you should feel proud of taking steps to make sure you are healthy.

If I am menstruating (having my monthly period), can I still get screened with VIA?

Yes. Menstruating does not affect the VIA test result, women who are having their monthly period can still be screened.

Is it OK if I have sex with my partner the night before I am screened by VIA?

It is OK to have sex with your partner prior to VIA screening. Sexual intercourse will not affect the screening test in any way. During the exam, the health worker will use a cotton swab to wipe the surface of the cervix clean.

Will they remove my uterus (womb) during a VIA screening exam?

No. The VIA screening exam is a visual exam that does not require the cervix or the womb to be removed.

Why should I come back for screening in 3 years if the mouth of my womb (cervix) is healthy?

You do not have any problems on your cervix right now, but these signs could develop over time. It is important to return for a new screening exam in three years.

Do precancerous cervical changes mean that I have cancer or that I am very sick?

Probably not, if a health worker sees that there have been some changes on the cervix, this means that you might have a problem that needs treatment. It does not mean that you have cancer. It is very important to seek the recommended treatment for precancerous changes so they do not become cancer.

Will the treatment with cryotherapy hurt?

Women who receive cryotherapy treatment may feel some cramping in the lower belly. The cramping usually disappears quickly, within 15 to 30 minutes, but for some women it may last for a couple of days. Most women experience watery discharge for up to 4 weeks following cryotherapy.

Do lesions reoccur after cryotherapy treatment?

Cryotherapy is about 90% effective in treating precancerous lesions. It is important for women to be checked one year after cryotherapy to be sure the treatment was successful.

If cryotherapy treatment fails, what can be done?

Women can receive cryotherapy a second time at her one-year follow-up if new precancerous changes are found. Women could also be referred for a different treatment if needed.

Can screen negative women be vaccinated with HPV vaccine?

Since almost all women 25 and older have already initiated sexual relations, they are not good candidates for the HPV vaccine, which works best among women who have never had any sexual relation.

Can condom prevent transmission of HPV infection?

While condoms may not be entirely effective at preventing HPV, they are still very important in preventing other STIs. This is why it is important for women to be screened for precancerous changes.

Does the VIA test treat STIs?

No. This is a screening test to see if precancerous changes have begun on the cervix. If the health worker identifies a sexually transmitted infection, STI, during the exam, they can recommend treatment.

Am I being tested for HIV?

No. The VIA screening does not include HIV testing. VIA screening test only checks for precancerous changes on the cervix.

How can I involve my husband/partner?

If you have a husband or partner, you may wish to discuss your cervical cancer screening visit with him and see if he can accompany you. You could encourage him to ask the health worker questions about the benefits of cervical cancer screening and early treatment.

What should men know about cervical cancer prevention?

Men should have the information to encourage women 25 to 49 years old in their lives to be screened and treated (if needed).

My husband is a polygamist. Can my co-wife get cervical cancer from me?

What you and your co-wife should know is that any woman who has had sexual relations in her life should get screened at least once in her lifetime, ideally when she is between the ages of 25 and 49, to make sure she stays healthy.