

Get the Facts: Three Myths About Cervical Cancer Screening

Help spread the word during January for National Cervical Cancer Awareness Month and throughout the year.

January 9, 2018 By Virginia Senkomago

I recently attended a school reunion and was able to catch up with some former classmates. I had not seen many of them for over 10 years. Of all the conversations I had that weekend, one about cervical cancer screening has stuck in my mind. As a friend and I discussed what we do, I mentioned that most of my work in the past few years has focused on cervical cancer prevention and research. She was curious to learn more about the need for screening.

My friend told me that she had not been screened for cervical cancer since the birth of her now 10-year-old daughter. What followed was a conversation where she gave me her reasons for not getting screened. I listened and tried to shed light on the myths she believed that make it okay for her to avoid screening.

Myth 1: I don't need to get screened because cervical cancer doesn't run in my family.

MythBuster: Most cervical cancers are caused by certain types of [the human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#). HPV is spread by skin contact during vaginal, oral, or anal sex with someone who has the virus. HPV is so common that almost every sexually active person will get it at some time in their life if they have not had the [HPV vaccine](#). Although HPV is very common, few men and women will go on to develop cancer. The lack of a family history of cervical cancer is not a predictor of cervical cancer and is not a reason to skip screening.

Myth 2: I don't need to get screened because I don't have any symptoms.

MythBuster: A screening test is done to find anything abnormal in otherwise healthy people who are not having any symptoms. When there are symptoms, a diagnostic test is done to find out the cause of the symptoms. Women with abnormal cervical cells aren't likely to experience any symptoms. But abnormal cells can still be detected by screening. Women should not wait for symptoms to get screened. However, if you have any unexplained bleeding, don't wait. See a doctor right away to find out why.

Myth 3: I don't want to get screened because if I have cervical cancer it can't be treated anyway.

MythBuster: Screening helps prevent cervical cancer. Screening finds abnormal cells on the cervix so they can be treated before they turn into cancer. It also helps find cervical cancer early, when treatment works best. Women who don't get screened regularly miss the opportunity to detect abnormal cervical tissue early, when treatment is very effective.

I was so glad that I had the chance to speak with my friend and share correct scientific information with her. I was also very pleased when she told me that she was going to schedule an appointment to get screened as soon as she got home.

Cervical cancer is preventable by [screening](#) and treating any abnormal cervical tissue early. The United States Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommends:

- Screening with a Papanicolaou (Pap) test every 3 years for women aged 21 to 65 years.
- Screening with a Pap and HPV test every 5 years for women aged 30 to 65 years.

Cervical cancer screening is covered by health insurance. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) [National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program](#) provides funding to U.S. states, tribes, and territories to deliver breast and cervical cancer screening to low-income, uninsured, or underinsured women. [Find out if you qualify.](#)

More than 12,000 women in the United States get cervical cancer each year, and more than half of these cases occur in women who have never been screened or who haven't been screened in the past 5 years. Spreading the facts and debunking these and other myths is important. Please help spread the word during January for National Cervical Cancer Awareness Month and throughout the year.

Virginia Senkomago, PhD, MPH, is a senior service fellow in the CDC's Division of Cancer Prevention and Control. Learn more about [cervical cancer](#) and other [gynecologic cancers](#), and get resources to share from CDC's [Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer campaign](#). [Click here](#) for more of Cancer Health's coverage of cervical cancer.

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