

Cervical Cancer

Level: Premiere

Objective:

Students should know causes, symptoms, and prevention of cervical cancer

Behaviour:

To decrease chances of developing cervical cancer, students should use condoms every time they have sex, delay having sex for the first time, and avoid smoking

Information:

Overview

Cervical cancer is caused by Human Papillomavirus (HPV). There are over 100 different types of HPV, and at least 13 of them cause cancer. Both boys and girls can contract HPV, though it usually does not cause serious health consequences for boys. However, it is important for boys to take precautions to prevent HPV, since they can pass the virus on to sexual partners.

HPV is extremely common and the majority of sexually active people will acquire the infection in their lifetime. In most people, the body is able to clear the infection on its own within two years and does not cause permanent damage. HPV rarely cause symptoms, and most people will never know they have had it before the body cures the infection.

In some cases, the body is unable to fight the infection, and after many years it can cause abnormal cells in the body which lead to cancer if left untreated. There is no cure for HPV, but if abnormal cells are detected early they can be removed before cancer spreads. Most commonly HPV causes cervical cancer, but it has also been found to cause cancer of the vagina, anus, penis, and throat; though this is less common.

Symptoms (usually only present when cancer has reached advanced stage):

Bleeding between periods or bleeding after sexual intercourse

Back, leg, or pelvic pain

Weight loss, fatigue and loss of appetite

Vaginal discharge that has a bad smell

Things that increase your risk of developing cervical cancer:

Multiple sexual partners

Early first sexual intercourse

Sexual partners who are significantly older

Early pregnancy

Smoking

Weakened immune system (for example; from having HIV or other untreated STIs)

Having a mother or sister who has had cervical cancer

Prevention:

- The most effective way to prevent cervical cancer is to get an HPV vaccine before becoming sexually active, although the student does not have to be a virgin to get the vaccine. The vaccine is an injection that protects against the two most high-risk types of HPV. Currently, it is not available in all places, but, may be available in the near future. At this point, the HPV vaccine is only recommended for girls, however it may be available for boys in the future
- Delaying sexual activity, limiting the number of sexual partners, and having sexual partners who are not significantly older also decreases the risk of cervical cancer. This is because it lowers the chances of contracting a high-risk type of HPV
- Students should use condoms every time they have sex. Condoms do not completely protect against HPV, but they do lower the chances of transmission
- Do not smoke cigarettes or use tobacco
- Maintain a healthy diet with many fruits and vegetables
- Even if the student is unable to get tested for HPV, they should get tested regularly for other STIs and HIV, and finish all treatments prescribed by their doctor
- Students should encourage friends, family members and peers to follow the preventative measures to reduce their risk of developing cervical cancer and increase awareness about the HPV infection

Treatment:

If students are having symptoms of cervical cancer, or are concerned they may have HPV, they should seek advice and care from a doctor.

Summary and Key Messages:

Cervical cancer is caused by an extremely common infection called Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Most people clear this virus without treatment, but sometimes it can cause abnormal cells which develop into cervical cancer. The best ways students can prevent cervical cancer are to get the HPV vaccine where it is available, delay the start of sexual activity, use condoms every time they have sex, and do not smoke.

Sources:

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs380/en/>

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/cervical-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html>