

What you should know about the Pap smear and Cervical Cancer



Photo by Maggie Dollarhide

Did you know that getting regular Pap smears can save your life? It's true!

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A note from Faith Moves Mountain's medical adviser, Dr. Jennifer Joyce,
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It has been my great pleasure to be health care advisor to the Faith Moves Mountain project. It has been a wonderful experience learning more about the strength of Eastern Kentucky Communities as we bring important information about Pap smears and cervical cancer prevention. Health is very personal, but it's also an important community concern. Pap smears bring this to light so clearly. Making the personal choice to be screened will improve your health, your family's health and improve the health of your community by decreasing the negative impact of cervical cancer in the community. Eula Hall from Floyd County Kentucky, founder of Mud Creek Clinic has said, "Things just don't happen, especially for women. You have to make them happen."

By choosing to have Pap smears regularly, you can help prevent cervical cancer. Our experience with Pap smears tells us that many women will be helped through regular screening from the ages of 21 to 65. Regular Pap smears will find worrisome changes of the cervix before they become invasive cancer. Your personal choice offers reassurance of your good health or informs you of early changes that may not be causing you any noticeable problems. Early stage changes can be treated to prevent invasive cervical cancer. Eastern Kentucky Women have long been agents for community improvement. Choosing to have regular Pap smears is one choice to help make positive things happen for yourself and your community.



What is a Pap Smear ?

The Pap smear is a simple test that finds changes in the cells of the cervix. The Pap smear can find signs of cancer at very early stages when treatments work best. Found early, cervical cancer can be cured in nearly every case. If not found early, on the other hand, cervical cancer can spread and be much more difficult to treat.

Pap Smears and Cervical Cancer – A cancer that can be prevented!

Barriers to Obtaining Pap smears

Clues to why women don't get regular Pap smears can be found in studying why women don't see their doctor regularly. There are many reasons why women do not get regular medical care including cost, time, transportation, child-care, attitudes, and forgetfulness.

The most common reason for not receiving regular medical care is cost. Particularly for those with limited income, it may be difficult to justify paying for health care when there are no

symptoms of illness and when there are other bills to be paid. Therefore, the cost of obtaining Pap smears may be an important barrier for women with limited ability to pay. Finding a way to persuade them that they should do their very best to obtain Pap smears regularly is the challenge of this project.

Many women say that **lack of time** is an important reason for not getting medical care. Women today are very busy, often working full-time jobs and caring for their families, and medical offices are often closed when the women are not at work. Many companies also discourage women from taking time off work to go to the doctor by not paying them for the time away from the workplace. To prevent cervical cancer, women must find ways to make time to obtain Pap smears regularly and to return for follow-up care if necessary.

Transportation often plays a role in the explanation of why women don't receive Pap smears as often as they should. Many families only have one car and there are no reliable means of mass transit in rural areas. These factors mean that women must find creative ways to get to the doctor.

Finding reliable, affordable **childcare or eldercare** may also be a barrier for women who need medical care. Most clinics or doctor's offices make no provision for elders or children who are not patients. Women coping with this situation must find someone to care for their children



or older loved one while they go to the doctor.

Attitudes play a major role in explaining why women don't get regular Pap smears. The attitude that seems to be most common has to do with symptoms. People go to the doctor when they have a reason such as pain, discomfort, bleeding, etc. To go to the doctor when there are no well-identified symptoms usually requires a different type of explanation. Getting a check-up for prevention is perhaps the most common explanation for seeing a doctor when there are no symptoms. Many people are convinced that going to the doctor should be reserved for situations when symptoms are present. Spending time and money on doctors when there are no symptoms may seem wasteful. Some people don't believe that diseases can be prevented at all. If women wait until cervical cancer progresses to the invasive stage (class V), the chances of cure becomes similar to that of other types of cancer.

Some women say that they don't want to know the results of their Pap test. Most Pap tests come back normal, but you should always ask your doctor or the nurse about how you'll get the results back. If you have an abnormal Pap test, generally you'll need to repeat it. If it comes back abnormal again, you might be referred for more tests or treatment. But new developments in treatment can be quick and relatively painless.



Forgetfulness is also responsible for some women not getting regular Pap smears. Having pelvic exams and Pap smears is unpleasant, so it is reasonable that women would not look forward to having their next exam. In fact, they may want to forget when they need their next exam. One of the easiest things that the project guide can do is to remind women that they need Pap smears and help them to find out when they should schedule an appointment.

Barriers Specific to Pap Smears. There are some additional barriers to getting Pap smears which women discuss. Among the specific barriers to Pap smears are listed not wanting to have additional pelvic examinations, having to go to a male health care provider, lack of understanding concerning the efficacy (effectiveness) of treatment, and misunderstanding concerning whether they have had a Pap smear during a pelvic exam.

The first, and probably most relevant, reason is that women simply do not like to have 'unnecessary' pelvic exams. As long as a woman is not pregnant, her monthly periods are normal, she is not in any pain, and she has no abnormal bleeding, she is unlikely to seek a pelvic exam.

Some women prefer a female health care provider when they have to have pelvic exams. This is a matter of personal preference, however, and is not shared by all women. There are many more male than female physicians, so it is more likely that women will have a male physician do their Pap smears. The project guide can be helpful to women who have a preference for a female (or male) provider by informing them of choices that they have.

Women may think that once they are no longer having children, or are no longer sexually active, they do not need to continue to have Pap smears. If a woman has ever been sexually active, she needs to have regular Pap smears.

Often women think that if they have had a pelvic exam, they have had a Pap smear. Many pelvic exams do not include Pap smears. It is important for women to know when they had their last Pap smear and when they need their next one.

Patients may feel that they have to wait too long in the doctor's office before being seen. This is an important barrier, if the woman strongly feels that the visit is necessary, she will be more likely to put up with the delay.

Finally, some women have strong beliefs about modesty. The stronger these beliefs, the more uncomfortable women are in medical examinations. For these women, it is vital that they understand the importance of a Pap smear to their health.

Action Plan/Next steps:

LHA: We've talked about a lot of things that can make it difficult for women to get a Pap test. What are some issues that prevent you from getting one?

LHA: Remember that getting Pap smears is something that you can do to prevent cervical cancer. The Pap smear finds changes in your cervix before they turn into cancer and, if you already have some changes occurring, the smear finds the changes so you can get the care you need.

LHA: Now let's talk about the steps that go with getting Pap smears.

1. Do you have a doctor that provides Pap smears that you can see?

If Yes, go to #2

If No, Provide information about the health department and clinics

2. Can you make an appointment with this doctor or clinic?

If Yes, go to #3

If No, find out why _____

3. Can you make the time to get to an appointment?

If Yes, go to #4

If No, find out why _____

4. Will paying for the appointment and test be a problem?

If No: go to question #5

If Yes, refer to resource list about:

- a. cost of test

- b. qualifying for services from the local health department (see c)
- c. Kentucky Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention program

5. Will you have any trouble getting to the appointment?

If No: go to question #6

If Yes, refer to resource list about:

- a. LKLP, cost and availability, how to connect with them.
- b. anything else?

6. Is there anything else that we can do for you?

7. Can we call the _____ (doctor, clinic) right now while we're thinking about it and set up an appointment?

