

# **Facilitating Cervical Cancer Screening Among Underserved Korean American Women**

## Intervention Curriculum

### **Unit 1: Cervical Cancer (knowledge/susceptibility/severity)**

#### **What is cancer?**

Cancer is the general name for a group of more than 100 diseases in which cells in a part of the body begin to grow out of control. Although there are many kinds of cancer, they all start because abnormal cells grow out of control. Untreated cancers can cause serious illness and even death.

Our body is made of very small cells. Normal body cells grow, divide, and die in an orderly fashion. The body renews and replaces its cells through a constant process of cell division and growth. Old tissues are replaced with new, injuries are repaired, and the body grows and develops.

Cancer develops when cells in a part of the body divide without control or order.

Eventually, altered genes and uncontrolled cell growth may produce a tumor that can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer).

#### **What is cervical cancer?**

The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb). It is sometimes called the uterine cervix. The body (upper part) of the uterus, is where a baby grows. The cervix connects the body of the uterus to the vagina (birth canal).

Although cervical cancers start from cells with pre-cancerous changes, only some women with precancers of the cervix will develop cancer. The change from precancer to cancer usually takes several years - but in some cases, it can happen in less than a year. For most women, pre-cancerous cells will go away without any treatment. Still, in some women, pre-cancers turn into true (invasive) cancers.

#### **What is the burden of cervical cancer among Korean American women?**

Due to increasing use of cervical cancer screening tests, such as the Pap test, there has been a steady decrease in cervical cancer over the past 30 years. However, rates of cervical cancer remain high among some women, including Korean American women.

Korean women have the lowest rates of cervical cancer screening compared to all other groups. A large number of Korean women have never heard of a Pap test.

Mortality rates are also higher among Korean American women at 3.0/100,000 compared to 2.4/100,000 for Asian American women and 2.0/100,000 for non-Hispanic white women.

## **Unit 2: Risk Factors for Cervical Cancer (knowledge/susceptibility/severity)**

### **What are risk factors for cervical cancer?**

A risk factor is anything that changes your chance of getting a disease such as cancer. Different cancers have different risk factors. For example, smoking is a risk factor for lung cancer and many other cancers. But having a risk factor does not mean that you will get the disease.

In thinking about risk factors, it helps to focus on those that you can change or avoid (like smoking), rather than those that you cannot (such as your age and family history). However, it is still important to know about risk factors that cannot be changed, because it is even more important for women who have these factors to get regular Pap tests to detect cervical cancer early.

Some of the risk factors for cervical cancer include:

Human papilloma virus infection: The most important risk factor for cervical cancer is infection by the human papilloma virus (HPV).

HPV can be passed from one person to another during skin-to-skin contact. HPV can be spread from one person to another during sex.

### **HPV & cervical cancer**

Certain types of HPV are called "high-risk" types because they can lead to cervical cancer. These types include HPV 16, HPV 18, HPV 31, HPV 33, and HPV 45, as well as some others. About two-thirds of all cervical cancers are caused by HPV 16 and 18.

Many women become infected with HPV, but only a few will ever develop cervical cancer. In most cases the body's immune system fights off the virus, and the infection goes away without any treatment. For reasons that we don't fully understand, HPV infection persists in some women and can lead to cervical cancer. Although there is currently no cure for HPV infection, there are ways to treat any precancerous changes that may develop due to HPV infection.

Multiple sexual partners: Women who have had a greater number of sexual partners have an increased risk of cervical cancer.

Smoking: Women who smoke are about twice as likely as non-smokers to get cervical cancer.

Weakened Immune System: Women who are infected with HIV are at an increased risk of developing cervical cancer.

Low SES: Women with low SES often have limited access to health care services, and may face challenges in receiving preventive health services, such as cancer screening. These factors can make them more vulnerable to illness and preventable diseases such as cervical cancer.

Human papillomavirus is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 100 different strains or types. More than 30 of these viruses are sexually transmitted,

at least 50 percent of sexually active men and women acquire genital HPV infection at some point in their lives. By age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired genital HPV infection. About 6.2 million Americans get a new genital HPV infection each year.

HPV is spread mainly through sex, women who start having sex at a young age, who have sex with different partners, and whose partners have had many other partners are more likely to have HPV. The highest rates of genital HPV infection are found in adults between the ages of 18 and 28

There is no treatment for HPV, but there are treatments for the cell changes in the cervix that it can cause.

Is there a test for HPV? Yes, there is a test that can find the types of HPV that can cause cervix cancer. An HPV test may be used along with Pap tests in women older than 30. HPV tests are now used to help doctors decide if some women whose Pap tests are not normal need more testing. Now this test can be given at the same time that a woman has her Pap test.

What is the difference between a Pap test and an HPV test?

A Pap test is used to find any cell changes in the cervix. An HPV test checks for HPV viruses.

I am under age 30. Should I have an HPV test and a Pap test?

Women under 30 don't need an HPV test and a Pap test. HPV is very common in women in this age group, but cervix cancer is very rare in women this age. In most women younger than 30 who have HPV, the virus will go away before it causes any cell changes or symptoms.

There is no "cure" for HPV infection, although in most women the infection goes away on its own. The treatments provided are directed to the changes in the skin or mucous membrane caused by HPV infection, such as warts and pre-cancerous changes in the cervix.

### **Unit 3: Cervical Cancer Screening (benefits and barriers)**

#### **What is cervical cancer screening?**

One way to prevent cervical cancer is to have regular testing (screening) to find pre-cancers before they turn into invasive cervical cancer. The Pap test (or Pap smear) is the most common way to do this. The Pap test looks for changes in cervical cells caused by HPV infection. If a precancer is found and treated, it can stop cervical cancer from developing. Most invasive cervical cancers are found in women who have not had regular Pap tests.

#### **What are the screening guidelines for cervical cancer?**

The American Cancer Society recommends the following guidelines for early detection:

Women should begin cervical cancer screening (Pap test) at age 21. A regular Pap test should be done every 3 years.

Depending on what your doctor recommends, some women age 30 or older may receive both the Pap test and the HPV test.

However, some women - such as those who have a weakened immune system (from HIV infection, organ transplant, chemotherapy, or chronic steroid use – may need more frequent screening. Talk to your doctor about how often you should be screened.

Some women believe that they can stop having Pap tests once they have stopped having children. This is not correct. They should continue to follow their doctor's advice or established medical guidelines.

#### **What are the benefits of cervical cancer screening?**

Having a regular Pap test is the best way to detect cervical cancer early. If cervical cancer is detected early, it is easier to treat and manage.

There are often no symptoms in the early stages of cancer. If you wait until you feel sick to go to the doctor, the cancer may be in an advanced stage and difficult to treat. This is why it is important to have a yearly Pap smear and pelvic exam, because then doctors can detect any potential changes early, and possibly prevent or control it from spreading throughout the body.

#### **What are common barriers to screening for Korean American women?**

Some common reasons why women do not want to get screened include fear or embarrassment, no insurance, non-English speaking, no transportation, and not knowing where to go.

Both doctors and physicians' assistants can give you Pap smears and pelvic exams. Contact your doctor or local health clinic to schedule an appointment. If you feel more comfortable with having a female doctor perform your exam, be sure to say so when you schedule your appointment.

Many women feel uncomfortable at the thought of having Pap smears and pelvic exams; some think these exams are painful. Although it is normal to feel uncomfortable, Pap

smears and pelvic exams are not usually painful and generally take only 5-10 minutes to complete.

Some women are afraid to be tested because they are afraid of learning that they have cancer. Fear should not be a reason for you not to be tested. For cervical cancer, there is a 99% cure rate, but only if the cancer is found early. So yearly exams can save your life.

Some women say that it is too expensive to go to the doctor when they don't feel sick or that they have no time to go to the doctor because of all of their family responsibilities. These are common excuses, and Korean American women often neglect their own health to take care of the family. However, if your family depends on you to take care of them, it is important that you are healthy. By taking care of yourself, you will make sure that you are better able to take care of your family and you are setting a good example for your children.

We will talk about each of these further to help you learn strategies for overcoming these barriers.

**Conduct positive modeling exercises:**

- Role-play
- Present testimonials and videos

**What low-cost/free options are available for cervical cancer screening?**

Routine screening for cervical cancer (i.e., Pap test) is generally covered under most major health insurance plans. A patient navigator can help you determine whether your plan covers a Pap test.

Tests for cervical cancer are also now available to some women through the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP). This program offers breast and cervical cancer early detection testing to women without health insurance for free or at very little cost.

The NBCCEDP tries to reach as many women as possible, including older women, women without health insurance, and women of racial and ethnic minority groups. Although each state runs its own program, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) give matching funds and support to each state program.

This program is offered mainly through nonprofit organizations and local health clinics, and is aimed at providing testing for breast and cervical cancer in underserved women. We will give you information on how to contact the nearest participating program.

Our program navigators can help you with any questions you might have.