



Sue Ann Says: You Can Prevent Cervical Cancer

Suppose your doctor tells you that a Wisconsin woman dies about every six days from an invasive cancer. And that cancer is almost always caused by a virus. And now there is a vaccine to prevent the virus. Do you say, “Bring on the needle!” Or do you say, “Nah, no thanks?” Personally, I’d do whatever I could to prevent cancer.

It’s true: 99.7 percent of cervical cancers are caused by specific strains of the human papilloma virus (HPV). Imagine, a virus that causes cancer! Where there is a deadly virus, there usually is a vaccine to eradicate it. If only all types of cancer were so easily prevented!

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that approximately 20 million people are currently infected with HPV, and at least 80 percent of women will contract the virus by age 50. In Wisconsin alone, almost 120,000 new cases are diagnosed annually.

There are more than 100 strains of HPV. Many are transmitted through sexual contact. (Note: HPV is not related to HIV, which causes AIDS.) The vast majority of HPV infections have no symptoms and go away on their own. Some HPV strains cause warts. But persistent infection with high-risk strains of the virus causes almost all cervical cancers.

“Make no mistake, this is an epidemic in every sense,” Wisconsin Chief Medical Officer Jeffrey Davis, MD, told me. “But it’s an epidemic we can bring under control.”

Knowledge equals prevention

Recently I traveled across the state with Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton and Dr. Davis to promote education and prevention of cervical cancer. We took our message to that hub of information exchange between women: beauty salons.

“Women do not have to die from cervical anymore,” Lieutenant Governor Lawton emphasized. “Routine screening coupled with vaccination can rid us of this epidemic.”

Here’s what women *must* know:

- More than 99 percent of cervical cancers are caused by HPV, a common virus. Once a woman is infected with HPV, other factors that raise her risk of cervical

cancer include smoking, family history, poor nutrition, long-term use of oral contraceptives, a weakened immune system, younger age at first intercourse or first pregnancy, and multiple pregnancies.

- Almost all cervical cancers can be prevented through regular Pap tests and HPV vaccination at the appropriate age.
- Men also can contract HPV. Because there are no screening tests for men and they rarely have symptoms, men can unknowingly spread the virus to their partner. According to the CDC, condoms can help reduce (but not entirely prevent) HPV infection.

Routine pap tests detect precancerous abnormalities

Gale Johnson, director of the Wisconsin Well Woman Program, told me that regular Pap tests and other screenings are the best defense to prevent cervical cancer. These screenings detect precancerous changes in the cervix. Abnormal cells can be removed or treated before cancer develops. If cervical cancer does develop, it is usually curable when detected early.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that women begin having regular Pap tests within three years after becoming sexually active, or no later than age 21. At age 30, if women have had three consecutive normal tests and don't have risk factors for cervical cancer, their doctors might suggest the Pap test every two to three years.

Vaccine prevents virus that causes cervical cancer

The HPV vaccine protects against several types of HPV that cause cervical cancer or genital warts. Given in three doses, the vaccine is most effective when administered before a woman becomes sexually active. Because HPV infection – and thus cervical cancer – occur most often in young women, the vaccine is approved for females ages nine to 26. The American Cancer Society and other medical groups recommend that the HPV vaccine be given routinely to females age 11 and 12. However, the vaccine does not protect against every type of HPV that cause cervical cancer, so vaccinated women must continue to have regular Pap tests and other recommended screenings.

Most private insurance covers the vaccine. If not, the federally funded Vaccine for Children Program covers the cost of the HPV vaccine for girls ages 11 and under. Contact your local or county public health department for information.

A call to action

As Lieutenant Governor Lawton, Dr. Davis and I toured the state, we asked women to spread the word that cervical cancer is both common and preventable. We called for leaders in every sector to raise awareness. We encouraged support of bills before the Wisconsin legislature which would require that cervical cancer and HPV information be available to parents and guardians of students in grades six through 12. Only when fully informed can we make the best healthcare decisions for ourselves and our daughters.

As a woman, a mother of two daughters and grandmother of precious little girls, I ask you, too, to learn all you can about cervical cancer prevention. I encourage you to share your knowledge with others. And I urge you to join me in ensuring that all Wisconsin's women enjoy a life free of cervical cancer. It isn't about morals or values or religious beliefs. It's not about abstinence or promiscuity; it's not even about sex. *It's about saving lives.* Because when it comes to preventing cervical cancer in Wisconsin, it all begins with a healthy, informed, woman.

Yours in good health,

Sue Ann Thompson
Founder and president
Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation

The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation is a statewide not-for-profit organization that presents women's health education and outreach programs, funds women's health research, and provides scholarships for women in academic medicine. Your donations help the Foundation reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about the Foundation visit www.wwhf.org or call 1-800-448-5148.

For more information on cervical cancer and HPV, visit the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation or Lieutenant Governor's web sites (www.wwhf.org; www.ltgov.wisconsin.gov).

The Wisconsin Well Woman Program, with sites in every county and tribe, provides Pap tests and other preventive services to women ages 45 to 64 who have little or no health insurance coverage. Call the program at 608-266-8311 for more information.