

Pap smears a must to protect against cervical cancer

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PhD student Leanne Christie's research has brought to light some common and dangerous misconceptions about how cervical cancer is contracted.

(Medical Xpress)—An alarming number of women don't understand that the common sexually transmitted infection human papillomavirus (HPV) causes cervical cancer, a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) researcher has found.

QUT PhD researcher Leane Christie, from the Faculty of Health, interviewed more than 1200 Queensland women to find out what they knew about preventing cervical cancer.

She said the research brought to light some common and dangerous misconceptions.

"Ninety per cent of women interviewed believed that [genetic factors](#) played a key role in the development of cervical cancer but in reality HPV is by far the most common cause," she said.

"Many women also didn't know that even if they had had one [sexual partner](#) their entire life, they could still contract the infection."

She said there was a need for more education around HPV.

"HPV is as common as it is contagious - it's the common cold of sexual activity and it can cause cervical cancer," she said.

She said regular [Pap smears](#) were essential to prevent cervical cancer and this was the case regardless of whether a woman had received the [HPV vaccine](#).

"The vaccine is one of the most significant achievements in modern medical science," Ms Christie said.

"Recent publicity around the National [Human Papillomavirus Vaccine Program \(NHPVP\)](#), which began in 2007, has improved public awareness of HPV, but the vaccine cannot protect women against all cancer producing HPV strains.

"The HPV vaccine protects women against the two most common and aggressive HPV strains but there are 20 others that can still cause cervical cancer."

Ms Christie said her research found many women did not realise that Pap smears were a powerful tool for prevention and not just for early detection of cancer.

"Regular Pap smears identify any [abnormal cells](#) before the cancer

develops, enabling steps to be taken to prevent the cancer from forming," she said.

"We know this because since the National Cervical Screening Program was introduced 20 years ago, the rates of new cases and deaths from cervical cancer have more than halved," Ms Christie said.

"It is also clear that the majority (82 per cent) of women who get [cervical cancer](#) have not had regular Pap smears or have never been screened."

Ms Christie said current recommendations were for women to have a Pap smear every two years, starting from the age of 20 (if sexually active) until they reached the age of 70.

"I hope this research helps reduce the stigma around HPV being a sexually transmitted infection and promotes more women to have regular Pap smears," she said.

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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