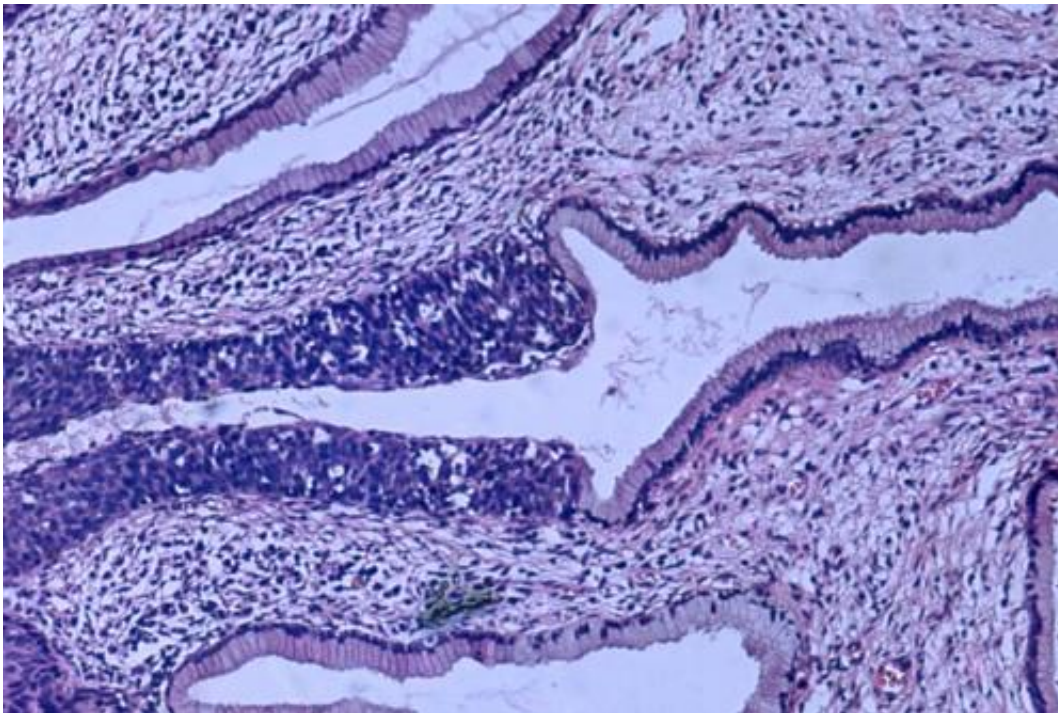


Cervical cancer is preventable, but still a leading cancer

January 11 2017, by Dr. Rachel Miller



High grade dysplasia (carcinoma in situ) in the uterine cervix. The abnormal epithelium is extending into a mucus gland to the left of centre. This disease can progress to invasive cancer (squamous cell carcinoma) of the cervix. Credit: Haymanj/public domain

At the beginning of the year, many women (and men) set resolutions around health and fitness, often focusing on weight loss. But one of the most important habits women can form revolves around regular health checks, particularly for preventable cancers.

January is cervical cancer awareness month. Unfortunately, Kentucky ranks in the top 10 in the country for cervical cancer incidence and death rates – a dire statistic considering cervical cancer is largely preventable through vaccination and screening.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) causes virtually all cases of cervical carcinomas. The majority of sexually active women will be exposed to HPV at some point in their lifetime; fortunately, only 5 to 15 percent will develop cervical precancer. An even smaller percentage will develop cancer. Other risk factors include multiple pregnancies, a long duration of [birth control pill](#) use, a history of other STDs, and tobacco use.

Nowadays, you can take an extra step toward protecting your children against cervical and other types of HPV-related cancers through the HPV vaccine. While this vaccination used to be a three-dose process, the CDC now recommends that all 11-12 year-old children (girls AND boys) get just two doses, with the second being given 6-12 months after the first.

Young women can get the vaccine through age 26, while young men can get vaccinated through age 21. Every year, more than 17,000 women and more than 9,000 men get cancer caused by an HPV infection.

Cervical cancer screening – the Pap smear – is a regular appointment that is often overlooked. This test looks for cancerous cells on the cervix, and can even find precancerous changes that have not yet developed into cancer.

I can't recommend this test enough – at Markey, about 95 percent of cervical cancer patients we treat have not gotten their recommended schedule of cervical cancer screenings. Screenings usually begin at age 21 or three years after first sexual intercourse. Talk to your doctor about a timeline for regular screenings.

One reason the vaccine and screenings are so important is because [cervical cancer](#) often doesn't cause obvious symptoms until its more advanced stages.

Some of the most common symptoms reported include abnormal bleeding or bleeding after [sexual intercourse](#), and an abnormal discharge. Many of these symptoms can be mistaken for less serious issues, such as a yeast infection or [urinary tract infection](#).

As the cancer advances further, it can cause urinary blockage, back pain, leg swelling, or neuropathic pain, such as a "pins and needles" sensation in the skin.

As you work through your resolutions for the New Year, make taking care of yourself a priority—and that includes scheduling a few regular trips to your doctor.

Provided by University of Kentucky

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