UNDERSTANDING CERVICAL CANCER

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervix is the lower part of the uterus which connects the body of the uterus to the vagina (birth canal). Cervical Cancer occurs when abnormal cells on the cervix grow out of control.

What are the symptoms of Cervical Cancer?

Symptoms of Cervical Cancer include irregular vaginal bleeding, bleeding in between periods or after sexual intercourse, post-menopausal bleeding and foul-smelling vaginal discharge. Some patients may also experience pain in low back or lower abdomen.

What causes Cervical Cancer?

Nearly all cases of Cervical Cancer can be attributed to persistent Human Papilloma-Virus (HPV) infection. Other risk factors are early marriage, multiple sexual partners, multiple pregnancies, poor genital hygiene, malnutrition, smoking, immunosuppression including HIV infection, prolonged use of oral contraceptives, and last but not the least, lack of awareness and screening.

Is Cervical Cancer common?

Cervical Cancer is the second most common Cancer in Indian women. It accounts for 16.5% of all Cancers occurring in Indian women. Every year, 96,922 women are diagnosed with Cervical Cancer in India and 60,078 die from the disease (GLOBOCAN 2018).

How can you protect yourself against Cervical Cancer?

A major cause of high burden of Cervical Cancer in India is lack of awareness and lack of cervical screening. Because of lack of screening, many cases of Cervical Cancer are detected in advanced stages leading to high mortality rates. Screening can find changes in the cervix before Cancer develops. It can also find Cervical Cancer early – when it has not spread and is amenable to curative treatment. You can protect yourself against this Cancer by getting a Pap test with or without an HPV test regularly.
Who should get Cervical screening?

Women aged 21 to 29 years, should have a Pap test every 3 years. From the age of 30, the preferred way to screen is to get tested every 5 years with a Pap test combined with an HPV test, or every 3 years with a Pap test, till the age of 65.

What is a Pap test and how is it done?

The Pap test is a painless outpatient procedure done during gynecological examination. It is used to collect cells from the cervix so that they can be looked under the microscope to find Cancerous and Pre-cancerous cells.

What is HPV test and how is it done?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) test is done to check for high-risk HPV (HPV strains associated with Cervical Cancer) infection in women. This is done by looking for the genetic material (DNA) of HPV on a sample of cells collected from the cervix. It is usually done at the same time as Pap smear in screening women aged 30-65 years (also called co-testing). The HPV DNA test is not recommended in women under 30. That is because HPV infections are common in sexually active women in their 20s and most of them clear on their own.

What if the Pap and/or HPV tests are abnormal?

If the Pap and/or HPV tests are abnormal, you may be advised for further evaluation, which may include colposcopy (a procedure to examine an illuminated, magnified view of the cervix) along with a biopsy, followed by management according to the results.

What is HPV vaccine?

HPV vaccine protects against infection from high-risk Human Papillomaviruses (HPV) – HPV 16 and 18 which are responsible for 70% of Cervical Cancers. The quadrivalent HPV vaccine also prevents infection with HPV types 6 and 11, which cause 90% of genital warts. The vaccine is recommended in girls aged 11 or 12 years. Teens and young adults aged 13 to 26 years are also given this vaccine. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently approved the use of vaccine upto the age of 45. In the older population, the vaccine does not treat the pre-existing HPV infection but prevents reinfection. It is important to know that HPV vaccination does not obviate the need for regular Cervical screening. All HPV vaccinated women need to be screened in the same manner and recommended time intervals as non-vaccinated women.

How is Cervical Cancer diagnosed?

Women with Cervical Cancer usually present with irregular vaginal bleeding, post-menopausal bleeding or foul smelling discharge from the vagina. These women undergo a complete physical examination and the doctor takes a small biopsy from the cervical growth to confirm malignancy. In addition, radiological imaging (MRI / CT / PET-CT) is advised to look for the spread of the disease, if any.

What are the treatment options for Cervical Cancer?

The treatment of Cervical Cancer depends upon the stage of the disease. Generally, patients with early stage of Cancer and in good general condition are advised surgery, wherein the uterus and cervix with their neighbouring tissues are removed (Radical Hysterectomy) along with the lymph glands in the pelvis. Patients with advanced stages of Cancer are treated with Radiotherapy with or without Chemotherapy.