

CERVICAL CANCER - THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY DETECTION

CERTAIN diseases, when detected early, can improve the quality of life of the patient, increase the survival rate and effectiveness of the treatment. In some cases, screening makes it possible to prevent and cure some diseases that, if not diagnosed in time, can become incurable or even lead to an early and preventable death.

Certain screening tests can reduce the mortality rate by 80%, as is the case with cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer begins in the cells that line the cervix, that is, the lower part of the womb. Despite having a high incidence, this disease, when detected early, is treatable. Usually cervical cancer develops gradually, over several years, beginning with precancerous cells that later develop into cancer. In most situations, these cells end up disappearing without the need for treatment, however there are cases that evolve into invasive cancer in less than a year.

These alterations can be detected early through the cervical-vaginal cytology exam, commonly known as Pap smear. It consists of scraping the surface of the cervix and collecting a cell sample. This test should be performed on women aged 30 to 60, and also other age groups if risk factors are known to exist. In principle, it should be performed annually, and after two consecutive negative results, intervals can be extended to three years.

Some factors can alter the accuracy of the Pap smear and should be taken into account: it should not be performed during the menstrual period and, 48 hours prior to the exam, patients should abstain from sexual intercourse, using tampons, vaginal creams, moisturisers, lubricants or vaginal medications.

In recent years, in addition to cytology, new techniques for screening this type of cancer have been introduced, such as the human papilloma virus test (HPV), which has substantially improved the effectiveness and sensitivity for an early detection. For teenagers and young



women, vaccine immunisation against the HPV virus provides almost 100% protection against some types of persistent infection. The HPV test and the HPV vaccination, in combination with cytological screening, will allow for a global and drastic reduction in cervical cancer.

However, since screening is considered a secondary preventative measure, it is always important to reinforce aspects related to primary prevention, such as avoiding risks and taking certain factors into account:

HPV infection, Chlamydia infection, tobacco, bad eating habits, weakened immune system, oral contraceptives, use of intrauterine device, sexual history, family history.

Article submitted by the HPA Health Group

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