

Cervical Cancer is Nearly 100% Preventable

Union Women Use Creativity to Get the Message Out

September, *Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Month*, is an excellent time to make sure union families know that cervical cancer is preventable and most union health plans cover the technologies to prevent it.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women around the world, killing nearly 300,000 women each year. In the United States, the American Cancer Society estimates that in 2009, 11,270 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer and 4,070 women will die of the disease. And yet, this disease is almost always preventable.

The Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW), working through its Cervical Cancer Prevention Works (www.cluw.org/cervcancer.html) educational program, wants to ensure that union women understand this disease and know about the tools that are available to prevent it.



“No woman should die of cervical cancer,” said Marsha Zakowski, president of CLUW. “Experts know that cervical cancer is caused by “high-risk” types of a common infection – the human papillomavirus, or HPV. And we now have available preventive technologies, including the Pap test, the HPV test and the HPV vaccine, to help stop this disease in its tracks.”

HPV is a common, sexually transmitted infection. Approximately three out of every four adults will have HPV at some point in their lives. Most HPV infections go away without symptoms or treatment. Infections that do not go away can cause cells on the cervix to change and become abnormal. Over time, abnormal cells can slowly develop into cervical cancer.

The Pap test looks for abnormal cells that can develop into cervical cancer. The Pap test is recommended for all women beginning at age 21 or within 3 years of becoming sexually active – whichever comes first.

The HPV test detects high-risk types of HPV, which can lead to abnormal cells. In women 30 and older, the Pap and HPV tests together provide the best screening protection against cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine protects against the two types of high-risk HPV that cause about 70 percent of all cervical cancers. The HPV vaccine is effective when given to girls and young women who are not yet sexually active. It is approved in the U.S. for girls and young women ages 9 to 26.

Because the HPV vaccine does not protect against all high-risk HPV types, it can't entirely eliminate the risk of cervical cancer. Thus, even women who have been vaccinated must still be screened to protect against cancer caused by HPV types not included in the vaccine.

According to Carolyn Jacobson, director of CLUW's Cervical Cancer Works program, unions are uniquely positioned to help educate women about these cervical cancer prevention tools.

“Unions represent 6.5 million women, and they have in place outstanding systems for communicating with these women about important issues such as cervical cancer prevention,” said Jacobson. “While Cervical Cancer Prevention Works leads many communications efforts on this topic, the program can't reach all women by itself. We need CLUW members and others to get involved and work with their unions to get this information out.”

Jacobson noted that union organizations and members are increasingly spreading the word in creative ways. The Central Pennsylvania CLUW Chapter, for example, recently sponsored a mother-daughter luncheon in Harrisburg, Pa., to educate multiple generations of women about how to protect themselves from cervical cancer. More than 60 people attended the event, led by Robin Pace, board member of CLUW's sister organization, Tamika & Friends, Inc., (www.tamikaandfriends.org) a national nonprofit organization dedicated to raising awareness about cervical cancer and HPV.

The luncheon's format was modeled after Tamika & Friends' signature "House Party of five" events, intimate gatherings that mix a party atmosphere with education so that women feel comfortable talking frankly about sensitive topics related to their reproductive health.

"When someone is interested in hosting their own House Party of Five event, they are encouraged to invite at least five friends over for the afternoon or evening," said Ms. Pace. "The host chooses the party theme right for *her* friends. For some friends it's poetry, for others karaoke, and for some friends risqué party games are the draw. Whatever the theme, no one feels lectured." A highlight of the Harrisburg event was a lively game of "HPV Bingo," also adapted from Tamika & Friends.

Carla Insinga, director of organizing for AFSCME Council 13 in Harrisburg, and key organizer of the event, said, "There are so many opportunities for union women to use our organizing skills – and creativity – to educate women about this important topic in ways that will resonate." One idea, Insinga suggested, would be to target university students for a similar intergenerational event, since many union members live in communities that have colleges and universities.

For those interested in holding an educational event regarding cervical cancer prevention, CLUW can connect them to speakers, as well as to resources for content and materials. One such tool is a DVD (www.say-something.org) featuring cervical cancer survivors Tamika Felder, founder of Tamika & Friends, and fellow union member Christine Baze, a musician and founder of the nonprofit organization, The Yellow Umbrella (www.theyellowumbrella.org), who talk about their personal stories battling this disease.

Another resource is the Pearl of Wisdom Campaign to Prevent Cervical Cancer (www.PearlofWisdom.us), a global effort to prevent cervical cancer, which is led in the U.S. by Tamika & Friends. The campaign encourages women to "wear and share" a Pearl of Wisdom about cervical cancer prevention. Pearl of Wisdom pins are available for purchase on the campaign's website, with all proceeds benefiting cervical cancer prevention activities in the U.S. Pearls can also be shared "virtually," through e-cards and web buttons that can be posted on Facebook and other personal web pages.

In September, Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Month, the Pearl of Wisdom campaign launched a promotion to encourage women to wear a Pearl of Wisdom and submit photos of themselves wearing their pearls to the campaign, which will post it on its website. After October 31, the campaign will randomly select entrants to win an assortment of prizes. More information is available at www.PearlofWisdom.us.

AFSCME District Council 13 meeting planner Diann Albright used the campaign's Pearl of Wisdom pins to reach out to the women gathered at her daughter's bridal shower. She gave each of them a pin and requested that, in addition to toasting the bride and groom at the wedding, they share cervical cancer prevention information with other guests.

"The ways to educate women about cervical cancer prevention are limited only by our creativity," said Jacobson.

For more information about Cervical Cancer Prevention Works or for tips on hosting your own cervical cancer awareness event, contact Carolyn Jacobson at cjacobson@cluw.org or 202-508-6901.