



## SOUTHWEST PUBLIC HEALTH DISTRICT

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January 6, 2009

**For Immediate Release**

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### **District health director says Pap test and vaccine keys to preventing cervical cancer**

With early detection and screening and a vaccine that protects against human papillomavirus (HPV), healthcare professionals have the tools they need to prevent cervical cancer, says Southwest Health District Health Director Dr. Jacqueline Grant.

“The task now is to educate the public so that they know about the disease and will take advantage of the tools to prevent it,” she said. “That is the message Public Health is sounding throughout southwest Georgia during January, Cervical Cancer Awareness Month.”

Grant explained that it takes years for precancerous cervical changes to progress into cancer.

“A Pap test can detect changes in the cervix that can be treated before they become cancer,” she said. Also known as a Pap smear, the test involves taking a cell sample from the cervix or vaginal cuff using a small cervical brush and/or wooden scraper.

In addition, a vaccine is available to protect against HPV, the sexually-transmitted virus that is usually responsible for precancerous and cancerous changes in the cervix, said Grant.

“The vaccine can prevent most cervical cancers,” she said. “It can be given to girls and women 9 through 26 years of age. Studies have shown the vaccine is safe and very effective.”

However, Grant stressed that receiving the HPV vaccine is not a substitute for having routine cervical cancer screenings. “You increase your risk of developing cervical cancer if you aren’t getting a regular Pap test,” she warned.

Other risk factors include smoking, beginning sexual activity at an early age, being sexually active with several partners, failing to use condoms, having a sex partner who has had multiple partners, having a history of precancerous changes in the cervix and having HIV or another condition that suppresses the body’s ability to fight off disease.

“It’s important to understand that having a hysterectomy or being past child-bearing age doesn’t mean you should automatically stop having Pap tests,” Grant warned. She recommended that:

- Women should have their first Pap test within three years of the onset of sexual intercourse, but no later than 21 years of age.
- Testing should be done yearly until age 30.
- Beginning at age 30, women who have had three normal Pap tests in a row may get tested every one to three years (at the discretion of their physician).
- After age 70, patients may choose to stop having Pap tests (after discussing it with their physician), if three or more recent tests are normal, and there have been no abnormal results in the last 10 years.

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- After a total hysterectomy, discuss with your physician whether it is necessary to continue having Pap tests.

“Early on, cervical cancer usually does not cause signs and symptoms,” said Grant. “Advanced cervical cancer may cause bleeding or discharge from the vagina that is not normal for you, such as bleeding after sex. If you have any of these signs, talk to your healthcare provider. They may be caused by something else, but the only way to know is to see your healthcare provider.”

For more information about Pap tests or the HPV vaccine please contact your county health department or go online to [www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org](http://www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org).

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