

THE OTHER BIG C

We rarely speak its name—cervix—because we barely understand it. Which is alarming, considering that death rates from cervical cancer are on the rise. Your best offense? Getting informed and staying proactive.

By Carrie Anton

When sports reporter Erin Andrews announced in January that she'd been diagnosed with cervical cancer, many headlines used the same word: *secret*. After all, the world was unaware she had undergone two procedures for it while working through the 2016–2017 NFL season and co-hosting *Dancing with the Stars*. But the word choice also underscores how little is known about the condition.

The same week of Andrews's disclosure, a report in the journal *Cancer* announced that deaths related to the disease are higher than previously thought. More than 4,000 women die each year from cervical cancer, and many doctors fear a further uptick if Planned Parenthood—where millions of women get annual check-ups and 270,000 women a year receive Pap smears (the test that checks for precancerous cells)—loses federal funding, as the current administration has suggested it might.

The recent string of news “should serve as flashing neon signs for young women to pay attention to their cervix,” says Sheeva Talebian, M.D., a gynecologist at the Colorado Center for Reproductive Medicine in New York City. When caught early, cervical cancer is highly treatable, says Talebian. Even more

encouraging: Experts believe 93 percent of cervical cancers could be prevented altogether. Use these six need-to-know facts to help keep your cervix—and yourself—healthy.

1. YOU MAY NOT NEED A PAP EVERY YEAR—BUT YOU DO NEED A GYNO APPOINTMENT.

When major medical organizations updated Pap test guidelines in 2012—to once every three years in your twenties and once every five in your thirties for most women—many opted out of yearly gyno visits. Mistake. You still need to climb into the stirrups annually so your doctor can visually scan for polyps, which, in rare cases, can become cancerous.

If you get an abnormal Pap result, your doc will test you for human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes nearly all of the 13,000 cases of cervical cancer in the U.S. each year.

2. IF YOU'RE OVER 30, MAKE SURE YOUR GYNO GIVES YOU THE PAP/HPV COMBO TEST.

Nearly all women will get HPV at some point in their lives—it spreads through vaginal, oral, or anal sex—and while the majority of cases clear up on their own within a year or two (often without symptoms), the virus is most likely to cause abnormal changes in

cervical cells when it lingers in a woman's body for at least a decade. That's why you'll likely be given an HPV “co-test” along with your Pap to rule out persisting infections. Only 13 of the 40 strains of HPV can lead to cervical cancer, and just 10 percent of infections caused by those high-risk strains will result in abnormalities in cervical cells. If you test positive for HPV but your Pap doesn't detect abnormal cells, your doc will retest in a year to see if the infection has cleared.

3. GOT A NEW GUY? USE CONDOMS NO MATTER WHAT.

He might unknowingly have HPV and pass it to you. A recent study found that 45 percent of U.S. men under age 60—roughly 60 million guys—are infected and may spread the virus to a sexual partner. What? Yeah, there is no HPV test for men, and the only way they know they've got it is the presence of genital warts, which don't always appear. After a couple years of normal Paps and HPV results, you can ditch rubbers—seems excessive, but it's your best bet.

4. YOU'RE NOT TOO OLD FOR THE HPV VACCINE.

The series of three injections is FDA-approved for girls and women (and boys and men)

ages 9 to 26. But if you're older and not in a long-term monogamous relationship, consider getting the vaccine. Insurance won't cover the cost (roughly \$500), but you'll have peace of mind.

5. INCONSISTENT PERIODS MIGHT SIGNAL A PROBLEM.

As can heavier-than-usual ones or spotting after sex. Early-stage cervical cancer can have zero symptoms or ones that are easy to brush off as signs of stress or PMS. Then again, those things can all be red herrings, so see your doc if you have irregularities. If caught late or left untreated, cervical cancer may require chemo or a hysterectomy—both of which can affect fertility.

6. NONSEXUAL BEHAVIORS CAN UP YOUR CANCER RISK.

If you have HPV, smoking or hanging out with people who light up can triple your cervical cancer risk. Experts suspect smoke weakens your immune system so it's less able to fight the virus. Stick to fully smoke-free restaurants—toxins can travel through the air in ones that have designated puffing areas—and never let people smoke in your home; fumes can get trapped in furniture fabrics. ■