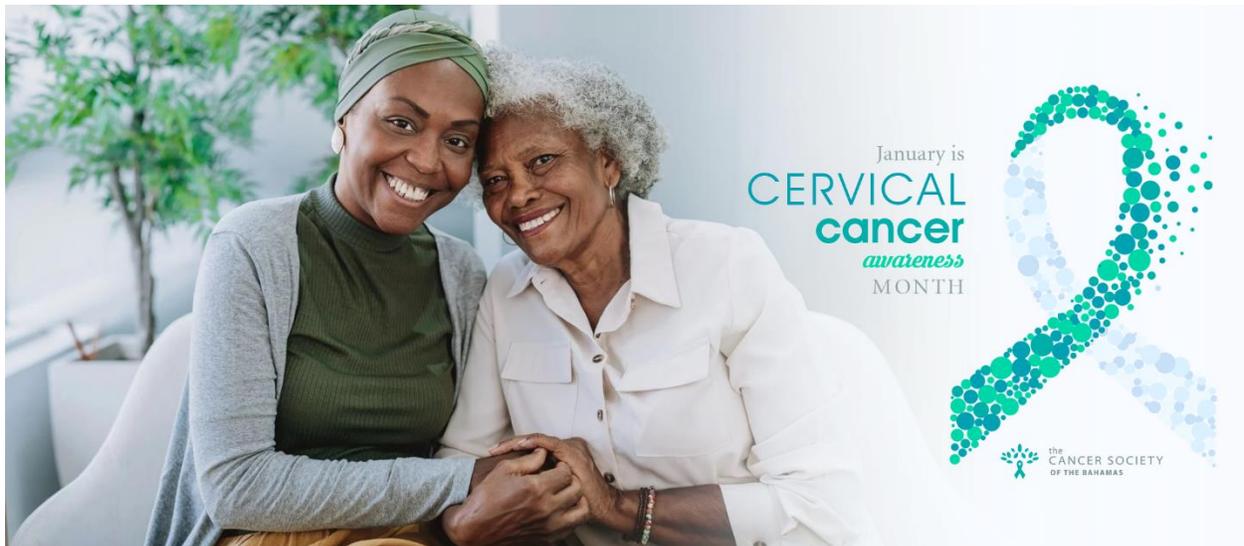




Cervical Cancer: A Silent Killer



Cervical cancer, one of the most common cancers among Bahamian women, forms when cells grow abnormally on the surface of the cervix, a small canal that connects the uterus and vagina. A key part of the female reproductive system, the cervix allows menstrual blood to leave the vagina, permits the entry of sperm into the uterus, and widens to allow babies to pass through the vagina during childbirth.

To help women safeguard their reproductive health, Dr. Homer Bloomfield, an obstetrician and gynecologist, raised awareness of cervical cancer and the detrimental risks it poses.

Symptoms of Cervical Cancer

As cervical cancer develops, Dr. Bloomfield says that it often causes no symptoms until it reaches an advanced stage, leading it to be called a silent killer. When cervical cancer reaches its later stages, he explains, symptoms experienced may include:

- Watery or bloody vaginal discharge that may be heavy and can have a foul odor.
- Vaginal bleeding after sex, between menstrual periods, or after menopause.
- Pain during sex.

Upon spreading to nearby tissues and organs, other symptoms may appear, including:



Dr. Homer Bloomfield

- Difficult or painful urination, sometimes with blood in the urine.
- Diarrhea, pain, or bleeding from the rectum.
- Fatigue, weight loss, and loss of appetite.
- A general feeling of illness.
- Dull backache or swelling in your legs.
- Pelvic/abdominal pain.

Cause and Risk Factors

In most cases, cervical cancer results from Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection, which spreads through sexual contact. While there are over 100 kinds of HPV, researchers have identified around a dozen that can cause cancer, according to Dr. Bloomfield.

If a woman has one or more of the following risk factors, Dr. Bloomfield says that she has a higher chance of developing cervical cancer:

- Haven't had regular Pap smears
- Have had many sexual partners
- Smokes cigarettes and other tobacco products
- Have a weakened immune system.

Detection and Diagnosis

With regular Pap smears, says Dr. Bloomfield, women can detect cervical cancer at an early stage, when it is treatable and curable. In addition to detecting cervical cancer early, he notes that Pap smears can prevent cervical cancer, as they detect abnormal cells in the cervix, which, over time, can turn cancerous if left untreated.

According to Dr. Bloomfield, when any abnormality is found during a Pap smear, doctors confirm a diagnosis by performing a biopsy. During a biopsy, doctors remove a small sample of cervical tissue for examination, most often under a microscope.



Treatment of Cervical Cancer

When cervical cancer is caught in its early stages, the cancerous tissue can be removed with surgery. The most common types of surgery for cervical cancer, as explained by Dr. Bloomfield, include the following:

- Laser surgery: uses a laser beam to target and destroy only the cancer cells.
- Cryosurgery: freezes and destroys cancer cells.
- Hysterectomy: removes the uterus and cervix.
- Trachelectomy: removes the cervix and the upper part of the vagina, but not the uterus.
- Pelvic exenteration: removes the reproductive organs, bladder, anus, and a part of the intestine.

In addition to surgery, some patients receive other treatments, which may include one or more of the following:

- Radiation: uses energy beams to kill cancer cells.
- Chemotherapy: uses drugs injected into the veins or taken by mouth to kill cancer cells.
- Targeted therapy: destroys specific cancer cells without damaging healthy cells.
- Immunotherapy: uses medicine to stimulate the immune system to recognize and destroy cancer cells.

Can Cervical Cancer Be Prevented?

For women looking to prevent cervical cancer, the two most important steps to take are undergoing regular gynecological exams and receiving Pap smears, says Dr. Bloomfield. Along with these two steps, he recommends that women do the following:

- Get the HPV vaccine.
- Use condoms or other barrier methods during sex.
- Limit sexual partners.
- Stop smoking and using tobacco products.

What is the Cancer Society Doing to Help?

At our PAP & PSA Clinics, held in various Family Islands throughout the year, the Cancer Society of The Bahamas offers free Pap smears to women, allowing them to take proactive measures against cervical cancer. For All Cancer Awareness Month, observed in May each year, the Cancer Society of The Bahamas holds a free Pap Smear Clinic for women in New Providence.

The programs and services available at the Cancer Society of The Bahamas include:

- Cancer Caring Centre – provides free accommodations for Family Islanders undergoing cancer treatment in New Providence.
- Adult Support Group – offers emotional and mental support.
- Freedom Kids Club – helps children diagnosed with cancer live normal childhoods by holding events catered to their disease.
- Assist with Port-a-Caths and port needles.

To learn more about our work or how you can get involved, visit www.cancersocietybahamas.org/newsletter, call us at (242) 323-4441 or (242) 323-4482, or email us at info@cancersocietybahamas.org. Whether as a volunteer, spokesperson, or advocate, your involvement can make a difference in creating a healthier Bahamas.