Cervical cancer screening rates below provincial target and vary with neighbourhood income

The rates for cervical cancer screening with the Pap test in Ontario are well below the provincial target of 85%, with overall 65% of women ages 20 to 69 having been screened in 2009–2011. Cervical screening rates are lowest for women living in the lowest income neighbourhoods and rise steadily as income increases. In 2009–2011, only 58% of women ages 20 to 69 living in the lowest income neighbourhoods were screened for cervical cancer, compared to 70% of women living in the highest income neighbourhoods.

Under-screening in women with lower incomes is a concern because cervical cancer is more common among women living in low-income neighbourhoods. Women with low income and education, who are older, who speak a foreign language or who are not Canadian-born are less likely to be screened for cervical cancer. Possible explanations for this screening shortcoming include lack of knowledge of cervical cancer screening, lack of time, language barriers and cultural factors.

An estimated 610 Ontario women were diagnosed with cervical cancer and 150 women died from this disease in 2013. Improving the cervical screening rate is essential because cervical cancer is almost entirely preventable.

- The overall cervical cancer screening rate among Ontario women ages 20 to 69 is well below the provincial target of 85%.
- Women living in low-income neighbourhoods have the lowest cervical cancer screening rate and the highest burden of cervical cancer.
- Regular screening, follow-up of abnormal results and HPV vaccination can help prevent cervical cancer.
with regular screening, appropriate and timely follow-up of abnormal results, and human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination. Between 1981 and 2009, incidence of cervical cancer in Ontario dropped by 38% and mortality by 59%. These large reductions in incidence and mortality are due to widespread cervical cancer screening.

For initiatives that Cancer Care Ontario is planning to increase screening participation rates, see the new Ontario Cervical Screening Program 2012 Report available at www.cancercare.on.ca/cervicalreport. For information on Ontario cervical screening guidelines and program resources, go to www.cancercare.on.ca/pcs/screening/cervscreening/.

References

Methodologic footnote:
Neighbourhoods are defined according to Statistics Canada’s standard geographic unit of dissemination area (DA)/ enumeration area (EA). Neighbourhood income quintiles were derived within each census metropolitan area (CMA), census agglomeration (CA), or provincial residual area not in any CMA or CA. Therefore, the cut-points for each income quintile are community-specific, to reflect the relative nature of this measure and to minimize the effect of large difference in housing costs on household welfare.

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