

Cervical Cancer Screening: Which Women Aren't Having Pap Tests?

Last year, an estimated 12,800 women received a diagnosis of invasive cervical cancer, and more than one third of them (4,800) died of the disease.¹ Deaths from cervical cancer might be reduced by as much as 60% if all women with an intact cervix underwent regular screening examinations.² A stated goal of Healthy People 2000,³ a US Public Health Service initiative published in 1991, was to increase the proportion of screenable women who have had at least one Papanicolaou (Pap) test to at least 95% and that of women who have had the test within the past three years to at least 85%. Now that the year 2000 has dawned, have these goals been met?

Data from a recent Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey⁴ suggest that the goals set a decade ago have not yet been met but that substantial progress has been made. From 1991 through 1997, 38 state health departments in the United States conducted a random-digit-dialing telephone survey of women 18 years or older in the civilian, noninstitutionalized population. Survey participants were asked whether they had ever had a Pap test and, if so, how long it had been since their last test and whether the test was for routine screening or for another problem.

A minimal but statistically significant increase in the proportion of women having Pap tests was noted over the seven years of the survey (Figure 1). In 1991, 91.2% of adult women with an intact cervix reported ever having had a Pap test; this proportion rose to 93.1% in 1997. Over the same period, the proportion of women who reported having had a Pap test within

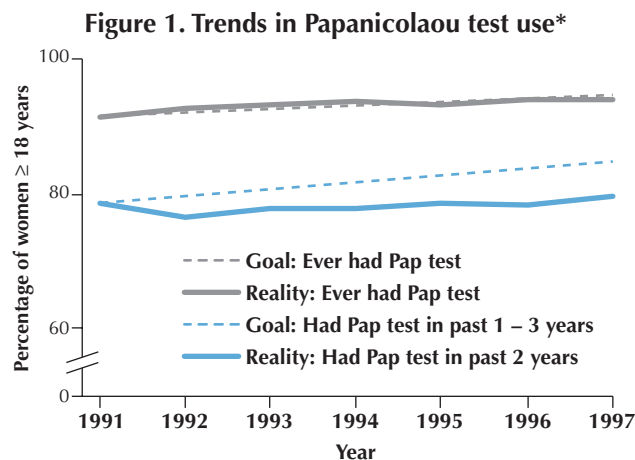
the previous two years increased from 78.4% to 79.7%.

The gap between the proportion of women who had ever had a Pap test and the proportion who had had the test within the past two years is disturbing.

Part of this disparity may be explained by the discontinuation of cervical cancer screening in women 65 years or older who have consistently had normal Pap test findings and for whom regular Pap tests are no longer recommended.⁵

However, the difference may also mean that some women younger than 65 are not undergoing Pap tests at the recommended intervals. Four subgroups of women were found to be least likely to have regular Pap tests. They include

Hispanic women and women with a low level of education, low income, or no health insurance. 



* Percentages shown are adjusted for the age distribution in 1989.

Adapted from Blackman DK et al. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 1999.⁴

REFERENCES

1. Landis SH, Murray T, Bolden S, Wingo PA. Cancer statistics, 1999. *CA Cancer J Clin.* 1999;49:8-31.
2. Brownson RC, Reif JS, Alavanja MCR, Bal DJ. Cancer. In: Brownson RC, Remington PL, Davis JR, eds. *Chronic Disease Epidemiology and Control.* Washington, DC: American Public Health Association; 1993:137-167.
3. US Public Health Service. *Healthy People 2000: National Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Objectives—Full Report, with Commentary.* Washington, DC: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service; 1991. DHHS Publication No. (PHS) 91-50212.
4. Blackman DK, Bennett EM, Miller DS. Trends in self-reported use of mammograms (1989-1997) and Papanicolaou tests (1991-1997)—Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 1999;48(SS-6):1-22.
5. US Preventive Services Task Force. *Guide to Clinical Preventive Services.* 2nd ed. Baltimore, Md: Williams & Wilkins; 1996.