Cervical cancer can be prevented

By Nakia Herring

The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2005, about 10,370 women in the United States developed cervical cancer and about 3,710 will die from it. Worldwide, cervical cancer is the second most common type of cancer that strikes women, behind breast cancer.

Cervical cancer develops in the lining of the cervix, the lower part of the uterus (womb) that enters the vagina (birth canal). This condition usually develops over a period of time.

"Cervical cancer, almost 100 years ago, was the number one cause of death in women. Because of the Pap test, it is no longer the number one cause of death, but it is a major health issue for women. What is exciting, is that we now know that there is one single cause of cervical cancer and that is the human papillomavirus (HPV)," said Dr. Marie Savard, a Philadelphia internist and a women's health advocate.

The human papillomavirus is a common sexually transmitted infection. It is estimated that 80 percent of Americans will catch the virus at some time during their lives. There are more than 100 types of HPV. Of these, 13 are high-risk types that cause cervical cancer. Two types of HPV cause almost 70 percent of cervical cancer.

"What is exciting and new is that there is a test that women can get, if they are 30 and older along with the Pap test, that can tell them if they even carry that virus. Women who have been sexually active or have been intimate will get the virus at least once in their life. They say 50 percent, but experts will tell you a hundred percent of women who are intimate will get the virus," says Dr. Savard.

The test Dr. Savard is referring to is the Digene HPV Test. The FDA approved the test in 2003 for cervical cancer screening, along with the Pap test for high-risk women.

A Pap test, the only detection method for nearly 60 years, fails to identify between 15 and 49 percent of women with abnormal cells before they become invasive cervical cancer. A recent study published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute found that one-third of all cervical cancer cases can be attributed to Pap test detection failures.

"Women who are 30 and over, if they get a combination of the Pap test and the HPV test together, we now can give them 100 percent piece of mind, with whether they have the virus or not," she said.

In the second annual report, "Progress Report 2006: The 'State' of Cervical Cancer Prevention in America," issued by Women in Government, the state of Maryland received a "very good" rating and is one of the top-five performing states in combating cervical cancer. The annual report is part of the "Challenge to Eliminate Cervical Cancer Campaign" launched in 2004.

Maryland's incidence rate of cervical cancer is 7.9 per 100,000 women and the mortality rate is 2.5 per 100,000 women, which are lower than the national averages. In the last three years, 88.9 percent of Maryland women have been screened for cervical cancer. Also, 86 percent of Maryland women have health insurance, and the Medicaid program covers HPV testing.

Senator Gloria Lawlah (D-District 26) stated, "We should be encouraged that Maryland is among the top-five faring states and has improved since last year, but clearly we still need to do more, given that this disease is preventable."

"While nearly 89 percent of Maryland women say they were screened in the last three years, all women must be screened regularly and be educated about cervical cancer and human papillomavirus, the virus that causes it. Furthermore, we must better ensure that our screening programs use the most advanced and appropriate screening technologies available — such as HPV testing — which can improve upon the traditional Pap test in identifying women needing early intervention," said Sen. Lawlah.