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MORE WOMEN CAN AVOID CERVICAL CANCER THROUGH SCREENINGS, PREVENTION

The year 2016 brought with it many celebrity deaths, and among them country singer Joey Feek of the Joey + Rory duo. Her death, at age 40, was from cervical cancer, a disease that struck nearly 12,000 women in the United States last year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The disease is highly treatable if caught early through regular Pap screening. Unfortunately, the CDC's data shows that roughly one in three women diagnosed with the cancer will die of it. More black and Hispanic women get cervical cancer than other women, possibly because of decreased access to Pap testing or follow-up treatment, according to the CDC.

This is echoed in data from the North Carolina Central Cancer Registry, which shows that in 2015, black women were the most likely to die of the disease. Each year, more than 350 North Carolina women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and over 100 die from the condition, according to state data. The majority of these deaths occur in women over age 45.

There are two ways to reduce risk of ever developing the cancer. The first is to prevent pre-cancers by preventing contracting Human Papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually-transmitted disease that has been shown to cause cervical cancer in some women. This is best done by delaying starting to have sex, limiting the number of sexual partners and by not having sex with people who have had many partners. There are also vaccines that can protect people against contracting certain types of HPV. The HPV vaccine is available at many area gynecologist offices, and at Catawba County Public Health by calling (828) 695-5800.

Even though women can limit their exposure to HPV, many women still contract one form or another. There are now tests for types that more commonly cause cancer. Even without the HPV vaccine or HPV test, a Pap test can detect abnormal cervical cells. This test is available through area gynecological providers and through Catawba County Public Health and the North Carolina Breast and Cervical Cancer Control Program. The program, known as BCCCP, serves North Carolina women who are uninsured or underinsured, who don't have Medicare or Medicaid, and who are between the ages of 21 and 64. The program serves women who have a household income at or below 250 percent of the federal poverty level, meaning a single woman can qualify for the program if her income is up to \$29,700 a year. It provides Pap tests and other screening services.

The Pap test itself is quick and simple, and is generally painless. It can detect abnormal cells and changes in the cervix and is performed during a pelvic exam. The Pap test helps doctors find precancerous cells. Treating precancerous cell changes often prevents cancer. Most deaths from cervical cancer could be avoided if women had regular checkups with this test beginning around age 21. Women should talk to their physician about how often to have them and when to stop having them.

Women who are concerned about their risks should consult their physician or call to schedule an appointment with the BCCCP program. Some warning signs of cervical cancer include abnormal vaginal bleeding, increased vaginal discharge, pelvic pain, and pain during sexual intercourse. Changes and early cancers of the cervix generally do not cause pain or other symptoms. Women should not wait to feel pain before seeing a doctor. Infections and other problems can also cause these symptoms, so consulting a physician is the only way to tell for sure.

For women who seek cervical cancer screening through the BCCCP program, there are special Breast and Cervical Cancer Medicaid funds that help clients who are diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer and who meet additional requirements. To receive this type of Medicaid, women must be enrolled in NC BCCCP prior to a cancer diagnosis. With the availability of the HPV vaccine and Pap tests, hopefully fewer women end up being diagnosed and fewer women will have to battle cervical cancer.

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For more information on the BCCCP program at Catawba County Public Health, go to <http://www.catawbacountync.gov/phealth/Adult/BCCCP.asp>. To request an appointment, call (828) 695-4445.

Catawba County Public Health promotes and protects the health of all Catawba County residents through preventive services, innovative partnerships, and community health improvement initiatives. For more information, please call (828) 695-5800 or visit www.catawbacountync.gov/phealth.

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