

Research Leads to Improved Screening for Cervical Cancer

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Physicians at Kaiser Permanente practice medicine that is based on information learned through research. We know that well-structured research studies are required to understand which medical treatments and tests will end up being helpful to people. There are many areas within women's health where investigators at Kaiser Permanente have broken new ground with their research studies.

One example of important women's health research that was conducted at Kaiser Permanente is in the field of cervical cancer prevention. It has long been recognized that PAP smears help find women who have a higher risk of developing cervical cancer. But we also know that PAP smears are not perfect.

Most women will never develop the changes that lead to cervical cancer, and yet 90 percent of Kaiser Permanente's female members diligently come in every one to two years for their PAP test. Because only women who have been exposed to the human papilloma virus (HPV) can develop cervical cancer, Kaiser Permanente researchers wanted to learn more about using HPV testing to help identify those women at the highest risk. We now know that testing for this virus is a more reliable way of finding women who have a risk of developing cervical cancer—especially among women over the age of 30.

Partially as a result of this research, testing for the HPV virus in women over 30 will be used in addition to PAP smears to identify women who have an increased risk of cervical cancer. Women who are positive for this virus will need to continue PAP smear testing every year. But the good news is that women who are negative for this virus will be able to wait three years in between PAP smears.