

Script – Print – Don't Relax When It Comes to Annual Cancer Screenings Cervical Cancer Screenings Down Significantly

Mary J. Blige has delighted fans for years with her music, but the Queen of hip-hop soul may have delivered one of her biggest hits during the Super Bowl, when she appeared in a commercial stressing the importance of annual cancer screenings.

Blige knows firsthand the importance of prevention. She has lost an aunt to breast cancer, another aunt to lung cancer and a grandmother to cervical cancer. "I didn't know about breast cancer or mammograms until I was 40 and I was in the music business and I was trying to take care of myself," she said in a recent interview. "I found out about it at the OBGYN. They don't discuss this when we're children. That's why it's extremely important to me."

It's also important to Dr. Alyssa Ceilesh, an oncologist with OSF HealthCare. She talks daily with patients about the importance of getting screened for cancers, particularly cervical cancer, which develops within the cells of the cervix, found in the lower part of the uterus.

According to the American Cancer Society, cervical cancer is the fourth most common cause of cancer in females in the world. In the U.S., 14,000 women are diagnosed every year and 4,000 women will die from cervical cancer.

"I've seen the data from the CDC and national studies that cancer screening overall has been down but specifically with cervical cancer we've seen a reduction in screening by 80 to 90%, which obviously is very significant and if sustained this could lead to misdiagnoses and people being diagnosed at later stages where the disease is harder to control," says Dr. Ceilesh.

Some patients admit that the fear of COVID-19 still plays a role in their decision to delay screening. But masking, vaccinations, boosters and clean and safe environments should reassure patients when visiting a health care facility.

"A lot of my patients are telling me they're still nervous to go out and potentially expose themselves to something or what they term as just a screening sometimes if they don't have symptoms they don't feel the urgency to go," says Dr. Ceilesh. "What I always counsel my patients about is it's so important for these screening tests so we identify it before you have symptoms."

A majority of cervical cancer is due to the human papillomavirus (HPV), a virus that is sexually transmitted and common in females and males. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that the HPV vaccine be given to girls and boys between ages 11 and 12. Smoking is another risk factor for cervical cancer.

Dr. Ceilesh says the symptoms of cervical cancer are very non-specific, which is another reason for screenings. Common symptoms include pelvic discomfort or pain, vaginal discharge or abnormal bleeding.

"I would contact my doctor right away if you have any irregular vaginal bleeding, bleeding between menstrual cycles, any unusual pelvic discomfort that doesn't go away after a few days or anything that feels unusual or out of the ordinary for you," she says.

Whether you see it in a commercial featuring a mega superstar like Mary J. Blige or it's coming from your physician, the message is loud and clear – make annual cancer screenings a top priority in your life.

"You have the power and the tools available to you to help yourself and help prevent this disease from happening to you and to our children, too," says Dr. Ceilesh. "There's a lot of cancers we don't have these tools available for so if we have them we should use them."

For more information about cancer, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).