

Early Detection, a foreign idea to Latinas  
Karla Rodas

Early detection of cancer can save lives. Latinas are less likely to reap these benefits. One reason is lack of health insurance. Another not so obvious reason is misinformation or lack of knowledge.

Uninsured Hispanic women are two to three times more likely to have cancer diagnosed at a later stage, making it less treatable. In California, Latinas have the highest risk for developing cervical cancer, according to the California Department of Health Services.

Not knowing can breed fear and that's not getting women to the doctor's office. Lorena Montes, a 44 year old San Ysidro woman, let at least three years pass without having a pap test.

She was sent by her general practitioner to have a mammogram. She said she was nervous and a little bit scared because it would be her first time. Montes had heard that mammograms were painful and that they pinched.

But she had a mammogram and a pap test and the results were normal. She'll continue to have regular breast and cervical cancer screenings, she said.

"Many women go in with fear but we feel very at home here," she said, referring to the San Ysidro Health Center.

Through the PODER, Promotora Outreach, Detection, Education and Referral program, Montes qualified for free screenings.

She is also on the program's call list so she can be kept up to date about future visits and classes that she can attend.

Veronica Rodriguez, a health educator, shares helpful information with women about breast and cervical cancer. She advises women not to let barriers such as embarrassment or wives tales keep them from getting screened.

One of the obstacles is denial and she tells women that the earlier you know the better chance of treating it and living a normal life.

The classes address the myths that prevent women from getting mammograms and pap tests.

“Some women think that under wire bras cause breast cancer or that it’s contagious,” said Rodriguez.

Part of the presentation is to show diagrams of the female reproductive system and the breast.

“It’s incredible that they don’t know what the cervix is,” she said, but after the class they know more.

The women open up and share their experiences and ask questions. Women have asked if they should go to the doctor even if they don’t have any symptoms or if mammograms are harmful because of the X-rays.

All questions are welcomed and all concerns are addressed. Rodriguez said that women should feel comfortable with their doctor and ask questions.

“It’s your right to know. The more you know the more you can ask,” she said.

Women have told her that they stopped having pap tests because of a bad experience. Mammograms and pap tests should be relatively quick and painless. If not then you should tell the doctor so that changes can be made, said Rodriguez.

“For women like me with low income this program was needed,” said Montes.

For more information about a PODER breast and cervical cancer presentation or free screening services contact Program Director Ilana Goldberg at (619) 205-6347 or (619) 205-6340.

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