

Empowering Young Women to *Get the Facts About Gynecologic Cancer*

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A National Comprehensive Cancer Control Program Success Story

Summary

All women are at risk for developing a gynecologic cancer. Every year in the United States, nearly 26,500 women die from one of the five main types of gynecologic cancer: cervical, ovarian, uterine, vaginal, and vulvar.¹ In 2016, SelfMade Health Network created a pilot program to educate college-aged women in Washington, DC. The program was based on CDC's *Inside Knowledge: Get the Facts about Gynecologic Cancer* educational campaign about the warning signs of gynecologic cancer. The pilot sessions increased participants' knowledge of symptoms and prevention strategies, empowered them to talk to their doctors, and set the stage for future sessions to address cancer health disparities nationwide.

Challenge

About 71,500 women are diagnosed with gynecologic cancer each year in the United States, and black women are twice as likely to die from the disease.^{1,2} Signs, symptoms, risk factors, and prevention strategies are different for each type of gynecologic cancer, and symptoms can be hard to recognize. Treatment is most effective when cancer is found early, but cervical cancer is the only gynecologic cancer with a recommended screening test. Therefore, education about how to help prevent, find, and treat all forms of gynecologic cancer is key to improving women's health outcomes.



Solution

SelfMade Health Network (operated by Patient Advocate Foundation) sponsored two pilot educational sessions at Howard University in Washington, DC for 35 female students participating in a summer program. Session organizers provided educational content from CDC's *Inside Knowledge* campaign to raise awareness about risk factors, symptoms, recommended screenings, and prevention strategies for the different gynecologic cancers. Another goal was to increase attendees' intentions to seek appropriate care when they recognized symptoms.

The sessions used informal themes, such as slumber parties, to engage attendees in a personal and conversational environment. Content included information about the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, which can prevent cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers. Survivors of gynecologic cancers gave testimonies, and a medical professional was available to answer questions. To measure the success of these pilots, organizers provided surveys before and after the session to measure changes in knowledge, attitudes, and intentions.

The findings and conclusions in this success story are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the funding agencies of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). To learn more about the National Comprehensive Cancer Control Program, visit www.cdc.gov/cancer/ncccp.



NATIONAL
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PROGRAM

Collaborating to Conquer Cancer

Results

A total of 35 college-aged women (18 to 21 years old) participated in the two *Inside Knowledge* educational sessions in 2016. Attendees completed pre- and post-test surveys to measure their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to gynecologic cancers.

Sessions increased attendees':

- Knowledge of gynecologic cancer symptoms, specifically
 - Abdominal or back pain (48%)*
 - Bloating (112%)
 - Change in bathroom habits (100%)
- Confidence in talking to their doctor about
 - Gynecologic cancer (83%)
 - Symptoms they may be experiencing (94%)
- Intentions to talk to their doctor about genetic testing (44%)

**Percent increase*

All attendees left the sessions with the stated intention to get the HPV vaccine if they did not already have it. Although the target age for HPV vaccination is 11 to 12 years, CDC also recommends the HPV vaccine for young women through age 26 if they were not vaccinated when they were younger.² Students also noted that the small number of attendees created an intimate environment in which they felt comfortable asking personal questions.

“Cancer runs in my family and before this event, I felt scared that I was going to get it too. Now I feel empowered and know of ways that I can protect myself. I will pass this along to my friends and family.”

- DC Session Participant

Future Directions

College campuses provide an opportunity for educating young women about gynecologic cancers. Educational sessions can be incorporated into a variety of programs where the intended audience is already present and transitioning to college life. Organizers can supplement and strengthen their efforts with resources from CDC's *Inside Knowledge* educational campaign, which can be found at www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge.

Moving forward, SelfMade Health Network is expanding its reach by collaborating with other historically black colleges and universities in the South to see if they will achieve similar pre- and post-session knowledge outcomes.



About the Program

SelfMade Health Network is one of eight CDC-funded national networks that works to reduce cancer health disparities in high-risk and underserved populations across the U.S. Knowing that gynecologic cancer mortality rates among black women are almost twice that of white women, SelfMade Health Network mobilized their existing relationship with Howard University, a historically black university, to pilot educational sessions with young women attending their summer program.

For more information about SelfMade Health Network, go to www.selfmadehealth.org.

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¹ https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/knowledge/pdf/cdc_gyn_backgrounder_10_f.pdf

² <https://www.cdc.gov/hpv/parents/vaccine-for-hpv.html>