

# An Ounce Of Prevention For Life

## Cervical Cancer Survivor Touts Vaccine, Exams



"I never want anybody else to go through what I did," Tamika Felder says of her cancer. (By Bill O'leary -- The Washington Post)

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Tamika Felder fully expected to receive a clean bill of health when she went to the doctor for a regular checkup six years ago. After all, her lab results had come back normal. She didn't have diabetes or high cholesterol, and her blood pressure was in the ideal range. But when Felder was ready to leave the office, her doctor nudged her.

"Now, let's talk about your Pap," Felder recalled the doctor saying. In that instant, Felder's life was about to change forever. The doctor informed her that she had cervical cancer. Just 25, she would have to undergo surgery and chemotherapy. Felder, a resident of Upper Marlboro who works as a cable television producer, had her uterus and cervix removed in the surgery. She laments that she will never be able to carry a baby. "And I still had to undergo chemotherapy and radiation to save my life," said Felder, now 31. "They had to burn my body from the inside out to save me from cervical cancer."

Despite her ordeal, Felder, whose cancer is in remission, said she feels blessed because unlike many women who receive similar diagnoses, she is alive.

Now, as she monitors her own health, Felder is speaking out about cervical cancer, encouraging women to have regular gynecological exams. In her message, she touts a new vaccine designed to guard against human papillomavirus, or HPV, a virus that is often sexually transmitted and is known to cause cervical cancer, one of the deadliest cancers in women.

The federal government approved the first vaccine for cervical cancer seven months ago. Since then, a number of states and cities have been pushing to make the vaccine mandatory for young girls in an effort to protect them before they become sexually active. Last week, nearly half of the Maryland Senate signed on to a bill to mandate that middle school girls receive the new vaccine.

Felder said she does not know if HPV caused her cervical cancer because she was never tested.

"Having the ability to eliminate a disease is something that cannot and should not be overlooked and should be made available to young girls," said Sen. Gwendolyn T. Britt (D-Prince George's), one of 21 senators supporting the bill sponsored by Sen. Dolores G. Kelley (D-Baltimore County).

The Senate bill is similar to measures under consideration in the District and in the Virginia General Assembly. New Jersey, California, Georgia, Texas and Kentucky also are looking at mandatory HPV vaccine legislation. And last week, the American Cancer Society, agreeing with many health experts, released guidelines in support of routine HPV vaccination for 11- and 12-year-old girls.

Former Maryland state senator Gloria G. Lawlah of Prince George's County said she likes the idea of the vaccine: "When was the last time you heard of a vaccine that can eradicate a form of cancer?" she said.

Felder and health experts who support the vaccine disagree with critics who suggest that the vaccination could encourage promiscuity or infringe on parental control over girls' bodies.

To Felder, who said she never thought she would face cancer at such a young age, the vaccine makes sense. She recently spoke at an event aimed at educating women on the importance of getting regular gynecological exams. The event was sponsored by The Balm In Gilead Inc., a Richmond-based nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that works to improve the health of the black community by addressing AIDS and other life-threatening diseases.

"We are dealing with a public health crisis," Perness C. Seele, founder and chief executive of The Balm In Gilead, said of the many health problems that plague the black community. During the event, Seele sought to strike down perceptions that the move to vaccinate young girls borders on an experiment not unlike one that occurred in Alabama decades ago. The U.S. Public Health Service in 1932 began the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which treatment was withheld from several hundred poor black men with syphilis, even after penicillin became available for curing the disease in 1947, allowing some of them to die. The study was conducted to determine, through autopsies, how the disease affects the body.

"We can't deny the history of what has happened because of bad public health practices, but let's be clear," Seele said, "Tuskegee was about medicine that was available that could have [cured] a disease." The HPV vaccine is about preventing a disease, she said.

Cervical cancer afflicts almost 10,000 women a year in the United States, killing more than a third of them. Minority and poor women are most affected, and African Americans die at a rate more than double that of white women. The cancer is caused by high-risk types of the HPV virus that trigger abnormal cell growth.

Some private insurers offer coverage of the vaccine, known as Gardasil. If legislation passes, girls from low-income households and homes with little or no health insurance will be covered through public programs. Gardasil has proved 100 percent effective against two of the most prevalent high-risk types of HPV, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Felder said she hopes that lawmakers in Annapolis will pass legislation mandating the vaccine. "I never want anybody else to go through what I did," she said.