ERVICAL Check - the National Cervical Screening Programme - urged women nationwide aged 25-60 to check when their next smear is due during European Cervical Cancer Prevention Week which took place at the end of January.

Across Europe, 30,000 women die from cervical cancer every year. This, says Dr Philip Davies, Director General of the European Cervical Cancer Association, is often due to lack of access to high-quality cervical screening programmes. “Ireland’s CervicalCheck screening programme is one of the best in the world,” Dr Davies said. “It’s a hugely successful public health measure.”

The Pearl of Wisdom pin is the European symbol of cervical cancer prevention. CervicalCheck and the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) used the Pearl of Wisdom campaign to highlight the vital importance of free regular cervical screening. Women aged 25-60 were urged to check when their next smear is due or to book their first smear test with a doctor or nurse registered with CervicalCheck. During campaign week some 22,000 Pearls were distributed through health promotion networks nationwide and women supported the campaign by posting a selfie with their Pearl on social media, using the hashtag #ShareTheWisdom.

Speaking at the campaign launch in Tallaght, Dr. Gráinne Flannelly, Clinical Director of CervicalCheck, commented: “Each year in Ireland, around 300 women are diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer and over 70 women die from the disease. The cervical screening provided by CervicalCheck, combined with the HPV vaccination programme, provides the opportunity to significantly reduce these rates.”

Dr Flannelly continued, “Over 79pc of the eligible 1.2 million women have taken part in CervicalCheck and we aim to increase this even further. Since the programme started, over 50,000 women have been treated for precancerous changes, reducing their risk of cervical cancer by 90pc.

So we are calling on all women aged 25 to 60 to check when their next smear test is due, or arrange their first test with a doctor or nurse registered with CervicalCheck if they have never done so. And to share the wisdom with other women.”

Women aged 25-49 account for 74pc of those screened through the programme, while women aged 50-60 account for 20pc, even though they represent 24pc of the total screening population.

IFPA Medical Director Dr Caithiona Henchion said: “There’s sometimes a perception that this is a younger woman’s issue; women think they don’t have to worry about cervical cancer after age 50. But women in middle age are still very much at risk.”

Dr Henchion continued, “Cervical cancer takes a long time to develop and often has no symptoms. Through screening, we can pick up abnormalities at the pre-cancer stage, when it is easily treatable. Having your smear test is a quick, free and painless way to prevent the development of cervical cancer.”

Pearl of Wisdom campaign ambassador broadcaster Maura Derrane said: “We’re all busy, and it’s easy to put off having your smear test. Especially as women, we often put caring for everyone else ahead of looking after our own health. But this test is so important. Tell your mother, your sister, your daughter, your colleague, your friend. It only takes five minutes, and it really could save your life.”

CervicalCheck is part of the National Screening Service of the HSE. The National Screening Service encompasses BreastCheck – The National Breast Screening Programme, CervicalCheck – The National Cervical Screening Programme, BowelScreen – The National Bowel Screening Programme and Diabetic RetinaScreen – The National Diabetic Retinal Screening Programme.

RTE broadcaster Maura Derrane launches the Pearl of Wisdom campaign for European Cervical Cancer Prevention Week (22nd-28th January). During the week, women aged 25-60 are urged to check when their next free smear test is due or to book their first test by visiting www.cervicalcheck.ie or calling Freephone 1800 45 45 55. Pearl of Wisdom is run by the Irish Family Planning Association in partnership with CervicalCheck – The National Cervical Screening Programme. Photos were shot at the Westin Dublin. Headpieces by Azure Jewellery, Cork. Dress available from the Jennifer Wrynne boutique, Powerscourt Townhouse Centre. PHOTO: MARC O’SULLIVAN.

More Information

Regular smear tests for women aged 25-60 are free from over 4,500 registered doctors and nurses nationwide, including the IFPA City Centre and Tallaght clinics. For more information, visit www.cervicalcheck.ie or Freephone 1800 45 45 55.
THE importance of keeping healthy and ensuring I followed the doctor’s advice was always something my parents instilled in me, writes Ashling O’Regan.

From finishing a prescription to keeping appointments, my smear test appointments were no different. I had my first smear test when I was 21 and have had a couple of them to date with varying results of Normal and Abnormal, although not abnormal to the point of any concern.

At 28 I was due for a routine follow up smear test. It was November 2015 and life was busy in preparations for Christmas and with work and my own social life. I had put the appointment letter aside for a couple of weeks. One evening as my Mum noticed I was reading the letter, I explained that things were busy and I was planning to wait to book the appointment until after Christmas when I had more time. Mum did not sit on the fence for telling me not to be silly and to book the appointment. ‘There’s always something you would rather do than get a smear’, she told me but stressed the importance of keeping on top of these things when they are due.

The next day I booked the test. Thanks Mum!

My results came back as detecting High grade CIN 3 Pre Cancerous cells. Over the next number of weeks and months I had a Colposcopy, which is a more thorough look at your cervix, a Biopsy to remove a sample of the Pre Cancerous cells and then a LLETZ procedure to remove all of the Pre Cancerous cells. In June 2016 I got the news I had hoped for when my six-month check up came back as negative for pre-cancerous cells and negative for the HPV virus.

Cervical cancer is one of the few that is preventable by early detection, something I now am fully aware of. While my journey has been brief and has had a positive end with no lasting issues I can’t help but realise that my intention to postpone my smear test in November 2015 could have very likely resulted in a very different experience. I have met and heard of many incredible and brave women who have been diagnosed, treated and recovered from cervical cancer. I know they would echo my sentiment that a simple smear test, and a few moments discomfort, is too important to postpone or ignore.

Ashling O’Regan lives and works in Dublin – she’s happy to share her story to raise awareness among women aged 25-60 about the importance of regular cervical screening.

HUGE COVERAGE FOR CAMPAIGN

CervicalCheck supported the campaign with an integrated communications strategy, which included radio and display advertising and social media promoted posts and campaigns. Excellent coverage was achieved, with over 60 hits in national and local press, broadcast and online media outlets.

Key hits included interviews with CervicalCheck service users and IFPA Medical Director Dr Caithriona Henchion on RTE’s Today programme, RTE Radio One’s Drivetime and TV3’s Ireland AM and articles in the Irish Independent, Irish Examiner and Evening Herald. CervicalCheck Clinical Lead Dr Grainne Flannelly spoke about the campaign and the importance of regular cervical screening with Dr Ciara Kelly on Newstalk’s Alive and Kicking.

Dr Flannelly also featured in an RTE News interview on the campaign launch and in several local radio interviews during the week.

The campaign’s #sharethewisdom social media drive resulted in strong engagement, with a high level of traffic to www.cervicalcheck.ie and almost 2,000 calls to CervicalCheck’s Freephone service (1800 45 45 55) during the week. Over 2,500 Pearls of Wisdom were also distributed to callers to the Freephone.

In addition, Screening Promotion Officers and Community Healthcare Organisations promoted the campaign and cervical screening on a local level with a number of initiatives across Ireland.