

Women Be Healthy: Increasing Cervical and Breast Cancer Screening for Women with Intellectual Disabilities

Issue

Cervical and breast cancer are both treatable if detected early. However, women with intellectual disabilities receive screening for cervical and breast cancer at lower rates than their peers without disabilities. Women with intellectual disabilities face a number of barriers to screening receipt including a lack of knowledge or understanding about exams, anxiety or fear, and absence of recommendation by physician.

Program Overview

Women Be Healthy is a course designed to teach adult women with intellectual disabilities about cervical and breast cancer screening. The course aims to help women understand the purpose of the screening exams, what happens when the physician performs the procedure, how to relax through deep breathing exercises, and how to advocate for appropriate health care. *Women Be Healthy* was originally designed as an 8-week, 12 hour course. It has now evolved to an 11-week series with 22 hours of class time.

Making a Difference

With funding from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, *Women Be Healthy* has been taught to 149 women with intellectual disabilities across North Carolina in the last 2 years. Both the women who have taken the classes and the instructors who have taught the classes have expressed positive outcomes from their involvement.

Shaping Tomorrow

Women Be Healthy offers a free health education program that helps women with intellectual disabilities understand and receive important preventive screenings. The class also offers the opportunity for the women to go on field trips to mammography and other medical facilities to view the equipment used for exams and ask the doctor or nurse questions. These field trips also provide an opportunity for local medical practices to understand the unique needs of women with intellectual disabilities. An instructor described her experience with her class: "The doctor invited us into the exam room and showed us all the tools. It was great because they were telling him what the tools were because at that point they had seen everything. You know, he was actually impressed with their knowledge."

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One *WBH* instructor shared a story of a woman with intellectual disabilities who found a lump in her breast after learning about breast cancer in class. The woman made an appointment with her physician and had the lump removed. The instructor shared, "I'm just so thankful that the class really helped. It probably saved her life."