



Cervical Cancer

for **Girls** and
Young Women



So what is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer affecting the opening of the womb at the top of the vagina. This cancer is easy to treat during the early stages but much more difficult if it is found late, so it is important to screen and find it early.



Cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papillomavirus (HPV), which is usually sexually transmitted.

HPV can also be transmitted from a woman who has HPV to her baby. Most women who are having sex have been infected by HPV, even if they have only had sex once. It is this HPV in the body that can cause the cancer to grow.

Almost half of all cervical cancers occur in women who have never been screened, and in Zimbabwe it accounts for a third (33.4%) of all cancers among women. Women living with HIV have 5-6 times higher risk of developing cervical cancer than women without HIV. Many women survive with HIV but die from cervical cancer, which is why the Ministry of Health and Child Care is focusing on preventing and curing cervical cancer.

Symptoms

The majority of women (80%) will not have any symptoms as it takes 10-20 years before one develops cancer, but less with HIV positive women. There are usually no symptoms in the early stages of cervical cancer so it is impossible to know if you have it. That's why it is so important to be screened because the precancerous lesions can be treated successfully. Once the cancer has been there for a while it can cause pain and bleeding during sexual intercourse, bleeding in between menses and/or increased vaginal discharge. If you have any of these symptoms see a doctor.



Be Cervical Cancer Aware

Are you showing any of these common symptoms of suspected cervical cancer?



Unusual vaginal bleeding



Pain and discomfort during sex



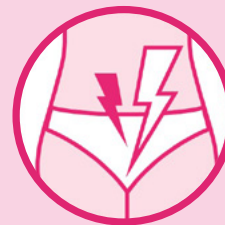
Unpleasant vaginal discharge



Bleeding after menopause



Leg pain



Pelvic pain



Weight loss



Constant fatigue

Illustration: © www.check4cancer.com

How can I prevent getting cervical cancer?

- The best way to prevent cervical cancer is to vaccinate against HPV. HPV vaccine is only effective if you get it before you become sexually active. Ask your nurse to find out if it is available!
- The second best way to prevent cervical cancer is to test for HPV. Those who test positive should receive screening through VIAC (Visual Inspection of the cervix with Acetic acid and Cervicography) or colposcopy, and treatment is done for any identified lesions.
- If you don't have access to testing for HPV, then you should receive VIAC screening.

What signs are they looking for?

The most common finding is that everything is normal. The second most common finding is cervical lesions – these are early stages of infection that may progress to cancer. These lesions need to be removed so that they don't develop into cancer. Small lesions can be treated through freezing or heating. Larger lesions are removed through a small procedure done by a doctor. Sometimes the nurses will find a cancer that needs to be removed through surgery.

- **Is it painful to screen for cervical cancer?**

- Most women don't find it painful at all. They are actually surprised at how easy it is, even if you have to have some of the interventions to remove lesions. If you do find it painful, ask for a painkiller. If you talk to your nurse, they can arrange for you to have a break during the screening.

- **How often do I need to screen for cervical cancer?**

- WHO recommends screening from age 25 until age 50, and to do it every three years, but in some places women start being screened as soon as they become sexually active. Talk to your nurse and hear what they can do at your health facility.
- In Zimbabwe the screening rates for cervical cancer are very low yet it is the most common cancer in women.

- **Why don't more women screen for cervical cancer?**

- For some people they don't know about this type of cancer or the HPV virus that causes it, so it is important to talk about it with friends and family.
- Another reason women don't screen is fear or nervousness about the screening process. Some feel embarrassed about discussing symptoms such as discharge or pain during intercourse and others feel uncomfortable about the opening of their womb being looked at by a nurse or doctor. **Remember these health professionals do tests every day and there is nothing to be embarrassed about, you are looking after your body.**

Ask your Community Adolescent Treatment Supporter, Young Mentor Mother or nurse about the Human Papillomavirus vaccine and cervical cancer screening and stop cancer early!



THE GLOBAL FUND

