

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

by The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Namibia

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Cervical cancer is when abnormal cells grow in the cervix of a woman. The cervix is at the bottom of the uterus. Nearly all cases of cervical cancer are caused by a virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV infection is common and most sexually active people will be infected with the virus during their lifetime. In the majority of cases, your body will fight the virus, you do not experience any symptoms, and eventually the infection will clear from your body. However, in some cases the virus may stay in your body and pre-cancerous cells may develop over time and eventually lead to cervical cancer. The growth of the cancerous cells is usually very slow. It can take 10-15 years for the cancerous cells to develop after a person has been infected with HPV. If a woman is regularly screened for cervical cancer, this should mean that it is possible to catch signs of possible pre-cancerous growth, and this can be treated before it progresses to cervical cancer.

HOW COMMON IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in Namibia, accounting for nearly 17% of cases. Cancers of the cervix, uterus, and ovaries are the second most common form of cancer, accounting for nearly 14% of cases. However, according to the 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, 1/3 of women have not heard of cervical cancer.

CAN CERVICAL CANCER BE PREVENTED?

Cervical cancer is largely preventable because it is slow to develop, it can be identified through regular screenings, and pre-cancerous growths can be treated. However, many women in Namibia do not go for regular screening. This can mean that for women who are infected with the virus, the cancer develops to an advanced stage before it is detected. This makes it much harder to treat. This is why regular screening is very important.

There is also a vaccination to prevent HPV infection. The World Health Organisation recommends that the vaccination is given to girls aged 9-13. This is because the vaccination is effective when it is given before a girl is sexually active and before the cervix has fully matured. It is not necessary to give the vaccination to older women, as they most likely have already been exposed to HPV and the vaccine will not be effective. In Namibia, the vaccination is not yet available through the Ministry of Health and Social Services but you can access it through a private healthcare provider.

HOW IS CERVICAL CANCER AND HIV RELATED?

A woman who is HIV positive is at least five times more likely to be infected with persistent HPV, which leads to cervical cancer, than someone who is HIV negative. This is because with HIV positive women, the immune system is not able to

fight the HPV infection as efficiently as with someone who is HIV negative. HIV infection often makes HPV worse, even if you are on antiretroviral medication (ART). Therefore if a woman is HIV positive it is very important that she goes for regular cervical cancer screenings.

Trained healthcare workers can treat pre-cancerous cells on the cervix and eliminate your risk of developing cervical cancer.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I VISIT MY DOCTOR TO BE CHECKED FOR CERVICAL CANCER?

If you are HIV negative, you should go for regular screening from the age of 25. If the first screening is negative, you should be screened again after 5 years. If your healthcare provider does not find any signs of pre-cancerous cells, you only need to go for screening every 5 years. Once you are over the age of 50, you do not need to go for regular screening as the risk of developing cervical cancer at that time is very low. If your healthcare provider does find signs of precancerous cells, your doctor will discuss the next steps with you. This may include treating these cells and more regular screening for a few years.

If you are HIV positive, you are at a higher risk of developing cervical cancer and you should go for screening every year. You should begin screening at the time you are diagnosed

with HIV, or at the age of 20, if you are diagnosed before this age.

WHERE CAN A WOMAN HAVE A CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING?

Your GP or local doctor should be able to screen you for cervical cancer. If your doctor finds abnormal cells, he or she may be able to treat them the same day. If the abnormal cells are advanced, you may be referred to a specialist. In 2017, PEPFAR through the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention supported the Ministry of Health and Social Services to open the first Gynaecology Rapid Access Services (GRAS) clinic at Windhoek Central Hospital. The purpose of this clinic is to provide a specialist service for gynaecological screening. The CDC is continuing to support the ministry through a pilot project to increase access to cervical cancer screening and treatment in additional regions in Namibia.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CERVICAL CANCER?

You can speak to your healthcare provider about cervical cancer. You can also contact the Cancer Association of Namibia or you can look on the internet at trusted sites, such as the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention website or that of the World Health Organisation.

