

FACT SHEET 5

TREATMENT OF CERVICAL CANCER

This series of health education materials is designed to provide information to primary health care providers and the general public about the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer prevention and control.

The series is comprised of the following health education materials:

FACT SHEET 1:

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)

FACT SHEET 2:

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV) VACCINES

FACT SHEET 3:

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

FACT SHEET 4:

EARLY DETECTION TESTS TO PREVENT CERVICAL CANCER

FACT SHEET 5:

TREATMENT OF CERVICAL CANCER



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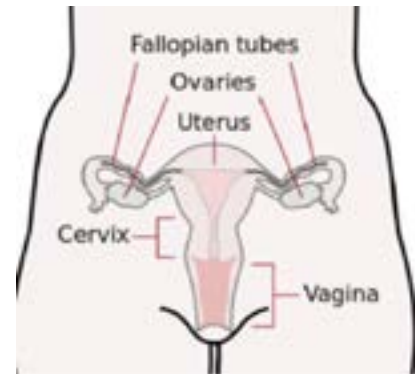
World Health
Organization
Americas



CERVICAL CANCER
PREVENTION IN LATIN AMERICA
AND THE CARIBBEAN



This health education material provides information on how cervical cancer develops and how it is treated. It is for use by health providers and by women, to be informed about cervical cancer and its treatment.



WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cancer is a disease in which cells multiply uncontrollably. When cancer develops in the cervix, or neck of the uterus, it is called cervical cancer. If the cancer continues to grow, it can spread to other parts of the body, beyond the cervix.

WHAT CAUSES CERVICAL CANCER?

Persistent infection with the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer. HPV is a common infection, transmitted sexually. Most women and men will have an HPV infection during their lifetime. Most of these infections will have no symptoms. HPV infection usually clears on its own, with the body's immune system response. However, in some women, especially those older than 30 years of age, HPV infection may persist over time and lead to changes in the cervix that can develop into cervical cancer.

Pre-cancerous lesions in the cervix are the first changes in the cells, before cervical cancer develops. These lesions can be detected with screening tests and treated effectively to prevent cancer from developing.

Cervical cancer can be treated and cured, if it is detected in its early stages. If treatment is not provided, cervical cancer can be fatal.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CERVICAL CANCER?

The typical signs and symptoms that need prompt medical attention include the following:

- * Vaginal discharge, sometimes with bad odor
- * Irregular bleeding, not within the menstrual cycle in women in their reproductive age
- * Blood spots or post intercourse bleeding, in women of any age, even in young women
- * Blood spots or post-menopausal bleeding, particularly if the bleeding does not stop after appropriate treatment.

HOW IS CERVICAL CANCER DETECTED?

If a woman has any of these signs or symptoms, or suspects cervical cancer, prompt medical attention should be sought. The health provider will perform a gynecological examination to observe a woman's cervix. If the health provider suspects cancer, a test to diagnose it may be taken, or the woman may be referred to a gynecologist for further evaluation and to take a test to diagnose cancer. The test, called a **biopsy**, will determine whether cancer is present. It will also determine the stage of the cancer, that is how far it has spread beyond the cervix. This will provide

a cancer diagnosis and information on the appropriate treatment to be given.

How the cancer is treated will depend on the size of the cancer and how far it has spread. The choice of treatment may depend also on whether a woman is planning to get pregnant in the future.

HOW IS CERVICAL CANCER TREATED?

Cervical cancer is treated with surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

* **Surgery**

Surgery involves removing the cancer cells from the cervix and nearby tissue. This treatment is indicated for early stages of cervical cancer.

There are three types of surgery:

- Cone biopsy: removes a portion of the cervix by cutting out the cells in a cone shape
- Simple hysterectomy: removes the uterus
- Radical hysterectomy: removes the uterus and tissues at the edges of the uterus and often lymph nodes in the pelvis area and surroundings. The tubes and ovaries are typically not removed.

After a simple or a radical hysterectomy, the woman will not have any menstrual periods and will not be able to get pregnant.

After surgery, it is common for the woman to feel tired and weak, and to experience pain and discomfort. Within 4-8 weeks following surgery, most women will have recovered and return to their daily activities.

* **Radiation therapy**

Radiation therapy uses high energy X-rays to destroy cancer cells. This treatment is used for any stage of cervical cancer. This can be used after surgery to destroy any remaining cancer cells.

Women with cancer that has spread beyond the cervix, might have radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

Radiation therapy is painless. It can, however, cause secondary effects, that may be managed. Most of the secondary effects disappear when the treatment ends.

* **Chemotherapy**

Chemotherapy is a treatment that uses drugs to kill cancer cells.

Chemotherapy produces secondary effects, such as nausea, and sometimes hair loss. These side effects may develop based on the medications and the dosage used to treat the cancer. These effects can be managed and will disappear when the treatment ends.

Most cancer drugs are either taken orally or injected into the veins.

The type and length of treatment will depend on the stage of the cancer and what treatment services are available.

AFTER CANCER TREATMENT

After cervical cancer treatment, women will need medical follow-up examinations every 3-6 months. This is to ensure the woman's well-being, following treatment. If the woman notices any problems between medical appointments, prompt medical attention should be sought. In some cases, cervical cancer can come back, or recur, many years after the treatment. Follow-up appointments will monitor and check for cancer recurrence. This monitoring includes physical evaluations, X-rays and ultrasounds.

If detected at early stage, cervical cancer can be treated effectively.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

- » World Health Organization. Comprehensive Cervical Cancer Control: A guide to essential practice. Second Edition.
- » American Cancer Society, ACS. Prevention and early detection of cervical cancer.
- » American Cancer Society, ACS. Biopsy and Testing for Cancer Cytology Specimens.
- » Centers for Disease Control, CDC. Fact Sheet Cervical Cancer Campaign Know Your Body.
- » National Cancer Institute, NCI. What you need to know about cervical cancer.
- » National Cancer Institute, NCI. Significance of changes in the cervix. Guide to Women's Health.

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