

CERVICAL CANCER

Overview

Across the Americas, lack of access to adequate screening and treatment services means that one of the most easily preventable, detectable and treatable forms of cancer has become a significant cause of mortality among women, especially poor women.

Although the mortality rate for cervical cancer in North America has declined over the last 10 years, it remains constant in the developing countries of the Americas (1). This reflects the need for a new approach to cervical cancer, one that emphasizes prevention and the positive aspects of screening and early detection.

Gender is all too often a factor in a woman's decision not to be screened for cervical cancer. A gender-focused analysis of the situation is necessary to fully understand the incidence of cervical cancer in the Americas.

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer is caused by a change in the cells that line the wall of the cervix (the lower part of the womb which connects the uterus to the vagina, or birth canal). These cells begin as normal, then gradually change to pre-cancerous cells, which appear as lesions on the cervical wall. The cells may eventually become cancerous, however in over 50% of women with pre-cancerous lesions, the cells remain benign (pre-cancerous). Cervical cancer in its early stages often exhibits no symptoms, which is why it is frequently not detected until it becomes severe (3).

The most common risk factor for cervical cancer is exposure to certain strains of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) (3). HPV is a sexually transmitted infection (STI), which may or may not be accompanied by symptoms. Because HPV is often asymptomatic, it can go for long periods without being detected (4).

Other risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- Not having regular screening.
- Initiation of sexual relations at a young age.
- Having multiple sexual partners, or having sex with someone who has had multiple sexual partners.
- Being HIV positive, which weakens a woman's immune system and makes her more vulnerable to infection with HPV.
- A family history of cervical cancer
- Age group – women aged 30-60 are most at risk and the risk also increases with age.
- Smoking
- Socio-economic status - because poor women have less access to screening and treatment services, their incidence and mortality rates are much higher.

Fighting Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer is considered one of the most detectable and therefore preventable forms of cancer because it develops very gradually. Thus through regular screening, it is easy to detect and treat before it spreads. Cervical cancer is also a more visible form of cancer than, for example breast cancer. Rather than having to look at the cells via an x-ray picture or take a biopsy, a gynecologist can scrape cells from the wall of the cervix and look at them directly under a microscope (5).

The most important tool in the fight against cervical cancer is prevention. Prevention is best achieved by regular screening (1). This presents some important challenges to women, especially poor women.

- Poor women, in particular those in developing countries often do not have access to free health services, or cannot afford to pay for screening. Moreover, if such services are available they are often in urban areas, which can act as an impediment for many rural women.

Cervical Cancer – Facts and Figures

- It is estimated that, globally, 466 000 new cases of cervical cancer are diagnosed each year (3).
- 231 000 women a year die of cervical cancer. 80% of them are from the developing world (3).
- It costs about 100\$ US to screen a woman for cervical cancer every five years.
- It costs about 2 600\$ to treat a woman with cervical cancer (3)
- In 1990, 74 871 women in the Americas were diagnosed with cervical cancer, 79.7% (59 646) of them live in South/Central America or the Caribbean (estimate) (2).
- In 1990, 33 535 women in the Americas died from cervical cancer, 80.3% (26 933) of them lived in South/Central America or the Caribbean (estimate) (2).

- A woman is more likely to put the health needs of her family above her own, so if money for a doctor is available, it will be spent on the children rather than their mother.
- Fear of her partner may also discourage a woman from having regular screening check-ups. He may refuse to allow her to go to the gynecologist, to pay for the screening, or for transportation to the clinic/hospital.
- In many societies women have no control over their sexual relations. Whether or not a woman can control when and with whom she has sexual contact is crucial in determining whether she can protect herself from exposure to HPV.
- Negative experiences with doctors or health workers in general may prevent women from having regular screening check-ups (6).
- Screening programs in Latin America tend to be linked to family planning programs, as a result they reach mainly women who are under thirty. Since the high-risk group for cervical cancer includes women between the ages of 30 and 60, screening programs are not as beneficial as they could be (1).
- A lack of information about the screening procedure, or fear of the results can also act as an impediment to regular screening check-ups (6).

The incidence and severity of such an easily detectable and preventable disease should serve as a call to action for health professionals, policy-makers and gender advocates alike.

- The message about cervical cancer must be one of prevention rather than treatment of the disease and its consequences. Screening, where available should be encouraged and women should be widely informed about the process and its benefits (6).
- A woman's ability to control her own sexual and reproductive health has been a gender priority for some years now, it must also become a public health priority. Not only to guard against the spread of HPV and cervical cancer, but also to slow the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STIs.
- Doctors and other health workers across the Americas must be trained to recognize that gender and a woman's place in a society have a profound effect on her health and the attention it receives.

Projects and Programmes

- The Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), together with the Program for Appropriate Technologies in Health (PATH), the JHPIEGO Corporation, the International Agency for research on Cancer (IARC) and EngenderHealth, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have formed the **Alliance for Cervical Cancer Prevention**, which works to promote the prevention of cervical cancer in the developing world. <http://www.alliance-cxca.org/>
- The **National Cancer Institute** maintains an online database of reference materials (in English and Spanish) on cervical and other cancers for both patients and health professionals. http://www.cancer.net.nci.nih.gov/Cancer_Types/Cervical_Cancer.shtml#genetics
- The **Argentine Foundation to Fight Cancer** (FACEC) has pledged to develop an early screening program for cervical cancer http://www.facec.com.ar/fc_trienio.html
- The prevention department of the **National Cancer Corporation** in Chile has identified cervical cancer as one of the targets for a prevention campaign. <http://www.chilnet.cl/conac/>
- The **National Association against Cancer** (ANCEC) in Panama offers pap tests to screen for cervical cancer. <http://www.panamatravel.com/ancec/mainanc.htm>
- JHPIEGO's **Cervical Cancer Prevention Program** explores alternative screening methods and aims to bring them to developing countries. <http://www.reproline.jhu.edu/english/3cc/overview.htm>.
- The **Program for Appropriate Technology in Health** (PATH) moderates a cervical cancer listserv which allows health workers and agencies worldwide to share information and opinions. <http://www.path.org>
- The Mexican state of **Oaxaca** has tripled the amount that it will spend on cervical cancer screening programs, from 1,300,000 pesos in the year 2000 to 3,000,000 pesos in 2001.
- The **National HPV and Cervical Cancer Campaign** has developed a set of guidelines to assist women and their health care providers in the screening, diagnosis and treatment of cervical cancer. <http://www.hpvandcervicalcancercampaign.org>

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