

# SECTION 4: PLANNING AN HPV TEST-BASED CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING PROGRAM: WHERE TO BEGIN?

## KEY MESSAGES

- The decision to introduce HPV testing into a cervical cancer screening program should be taken at the highest level of the public health authority and as part of a public health strategy to improve the program.
- Engaging the main stakeholders from the beginning of the planning process, and building consensus among them, are key components to ensure effective introduction of this new technology.
- HPV testing is an attractive technology and can be used to mobilize resources and motivate stakeholders to improve the program. HPV testing does not replace the need for an organized screening program.

## HPV TEST AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Introduction of HPV testing provides an opportunity to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of a cervical cancer screening program. Its introduction involves changes in ways of working, in addition to changes in the organization of health services. The following provides guidance on how and where to begin with the introduction of HPV testing into screening programs.

### ***Specific aspects to consider for an HPV test-based screening program:***

- Define the HPV testing target age group, frequency of screening, and algorithms that may include: HPV screen-and-treat, or HPV followed by VIA, or HPV followed by cytology.
- Establish screening coverage goals and define the strategies to be used to achieve a high coverage of the target age group.
- Establish strategies to ensure all women with HPV positive test results will receive follow-up care, and ensure service availability to avoid overload and a backlog in colposcopy and biopsy services.

- Consider logistical issues, such as the fact that HPV tests have an expiration date and need to be used prior to their expiration.
- Consider the psychosocial impact of HPV test results on women. For this, it is vital to ensure that health teams, responsible for delivering HPV test results, have a deep understanding about HPV, HPV testing and cervical cancer.

### ***How to begin to introduce HPV testing in a cervical cancer screening program:***

- Review the current situation of the screening program, analyze the current capacity and resources in the health system, and identify gaps and needs to improve the screening program.
- Build the political will to introduce HPV testing among health decision-makers and leaders.
- Establish clinical guidelines for HPV testing.
- Publicize and promote the introduction of HPV testing with relevant stakeholders, including medical associations, governmental and nongovernmental health agencies, civil society groups, and universities.
- Establish an advisory committee, with key stakeholders, to design and monitor the HPV test-based screening program.
- Involve the mass media to raise public awareness about HPV and HPV testing.
- Begin to introduce HPV testing on small scale demonstration or pilot programs, and expand as resources permit.

### ***Review the current cervical cancer program***

First, begin with an analysis of the cervical cancer situation in the country by identifying the women most affected, geographical areas with the greatest incidence, knowledge and attitudes of women and their partners, as well as health providers, etc. Then review the health service capacity and needs for screening, diagnosis, and treatment of precancerous lesions and invasive cancer. Finally, evaluate the specific needs for the introduction of HPV testing into the screening program, including identifying the barriers and opportunities for introduction of HPV testing.

### ***Establish HPV testing guidelines***

It is critical to establish clinical guidelines for HPV testing, based on evidence, including the target age group for screening and frequency of screening. The guidelines should also establish algorithms for the management of women with HPV test results, and especially how women with HPV positive test results will be managed. Program monitoring and evaluation indicators, including screening coverage targets, should be established. This should be done with the involvement of local stakeholders and leaders.

### ***Ensure political will for the introduction of HPV testing***

The political will to introduce HPV testing in an organized cervical cancer screening program is critical. This should be reflected at the highest level of the public health system, that is the Ministry of Health, and be reflected in the national program budget and management processes. Political will is also required among the

professional associations and public health workforce to support the change of practice needed to integrate HPV testing into screening programs.

### ***Publicize the introduction of HPV testing among stakeholders***

Publicize the introduction of HPV testing among scientific societies, governmental and nongovernmental health agencies, civil society groups, and universities, among other stakeholders. This will involve scientific presentations, especially in the early stages of the process, to build institutional commitments for HPV testing, and discussions to ensure that criticism and dissent contribute to the project's development and do not become obstacles to successful implementation.

### ***Present the plans for HPV testing to health administrators and providers in the jurisdiction where it will first be implemented***

A meeting with local health administrators and providers should be held, and following meetings with the highest health authorities, to present scientific information and the plans for HPV testing. These planning meetings should be as participatory as possible to involve all stakeholders in the planning, and to strengthen their commitment to the roll out of HPV testing.

### ***Establish an external advisory group***

An external advisory group, with experts and professionals experienced in HPV testing, can be established to help plan the introduction of HPV testing and ensure the credibility and viability of the plans. The advisory group may be composed of representatives from scientific societies, academia, nongovernmental organizations and international health agencies with experience in introducing new technologies. The advisory group can also assist in evaluating the program's implementation and suggest improvements.

### ***Disseminate scientific evidence***

Presentation of the plans for HPV testing to national and international scientific agencies, and during professional meetings and conferences, can be a useful way to gain widespread support for the HPV testing program.

### ***Involve mass media***

Involving the mass media to promote messages about HPV testing can help to obtain a greater commitment from the public and health providers when the program is rolled out. There is generally little media information about HPV and cervical cancer screening, and many biased reports about HPV vaccines have emerged. So it is necessary to provide journalists with current and scientific information to help raise awareness and understanding of HPV testing.

### ***Begin implementation on a small scale***

Introducing HPV testing may require changes in the health services. Therefore, small scale demonstration or pilot projects are recommended to begin implementation. Then, based on lessons learned, the program can be expanded to other geographical areas as resources permit.