

SECTION 9: COMMUNICATING RESULTS ABOUT HPV TESTING

KEY MESSAGES

- Communicating information about HPV and HPV testing are critical aspects of a cervical cancer prevention program.
- Information needs to be provided on HPV, its relationship to cervical cancer, and the role of HPV testing to prevent cervical cancer.

COMMUNICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF HPV TESTING

The introduction of HPV testing in cervical cancer screening programs includes developing communication strategies and messages that target a range of audiences: women, their partners and families, community leaders, health providers, and journalists.

Communication strategies are needed to ensure that the cervical cancer program objectives and priorities are met, particularly to inform and encourage women to seek screening services and adhere to follow-up care.

Women's perceptions and knowledge about HPV and cervical cancer

In developing a communications strategy, it is important to take into consideration women's knowledge, understanding and perceptions about cervical cancer and to tailor messages and strategies accordingly. Some considerations include the following:

- Women generally identify the cervix with the reproductive tract, without specifying its location, anatomy, or function.
- Women perceive cervical cancer as a disease that is severe, invasive, incurable, and associated with death. It is seen as a disease that remains latent and is activated by chance or by a specific incident, such as being hit, having a miscarriage, or pregnancy.
- Women generally describe Pap smears as an uncomfortable and annoying experience, rather than painful.

In general, knowledge about HPV is limited among the general population and health professionals. Information about HPV tends to be infrequent, inadequate and can be confusing to women, without responding to their information needs. Many people have not yet learned about HPV infection and its link to cervical cancer.

Some media attention has been given to HPV, but without details or important aspects covered. For example, a survey of media stories on HPV showed that 50% of stories explained that HPV is a very common sexually transmitted virus, but only 8% of the media content differentiated between HPV that cause warts and high-risk HPV that cause cancer, and only 13% of stories included information that HPV infection generally disappears on its own. In addition, an analysis of 75 brochures on cervical cancer screening revealed that the materials addressed medical, more than psychological concerns about HPV testing; and the least mentioned topics were the feelings that women might experience in response to an HPV positive test result, such as stigma, fear, guilt, helplessness, anger, and anxiety (Mast TC *et al.* 2009).

Communication on HPV and HPV testing

Primary audiences

There are two main audiences to consider in developing a communication strategy: women and health teams. Other audiences that need to be considered are community health workers, professionals in nongovernmental health organizations, and journalists. Messages to consider are described in the table below and in the Annex: Women's Frequently Asked Questions.

Key messages for women

TOPIC	KEY MESSAGES FOR WOMEN
CERVICAL CANCER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cervical cancer occurs when there is an abnormal growth of cervical cells. • Cervical cancer is caused by persistent infection by high-risk HPV types.
HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HPV is a very common virus, transmitted by sexual contact. • The majority of people will have an HPV infection during their lifetime. • In most cases, HPV infection clears by itself, from the body's own immune response. • Some HPV infections may not clear, and will become persistent. This can cause lesions on the cervix.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persistent infection with high-risk HPV types is the cause of cervical cancer. • If not detected and treated, HPV infections can cause precancer lesions in the cervix, that can develop into cervical cancer. It is estimated to take 10-15 years from HPV infection to the development of cervical cancer. • Having an HPV infection does not mean having cancer.
HPV TEST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The HPV test determines whether there is an HPV infection in the cervix. • The HPV test is taken during a gynecological examination. A small brush is used to collect a sample of cells from around the cervix. The brush is placed in a tube that is sent to the laboratory for analysis.
HPV TEST RESULTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test results are generally given as HPV positive or HPV negative. • A negative result means that an HPV infection was not found in the cervix. • A positive result means that an HPV infection was found, and that other tests or treatment are needed.

Considerations for health providers, when talking to women about HPV and cervical cancer

- Explain to women the reproductive system, the location of the cervix, and its function.
- Use clear and plain language, without jargon or highly technical terms.
- Utilize pamphlets, posters, flipcharts, or other visual materials.
- Ask the woman about her knowledge of HPV, cervical cancer, screening and treatment. This would be a good starting point for a discussion on HPV testing and cervical cancer prevention.
- Inquire about whether the woman has heard about the HPV test and what she expects from the testing. Ask her whether she has previously had a Pap test and is familiar with the procedure.
- Consider that women may feel embarrassed to talk about HPV and cervical cancer.
- Cervical cancer is a serious disease and often associated with death. It is important to emphasize that cervical cancer can be prevented and the HPV testing is a tool to detect whether women are at risk for cervical cancer.
- Because it is a sexually transmitted virus, a woman may ask how she became infected, or whether she could infect someone else. Clarify that HPV is a common virus that most people will have at some point in their lives.
- Explain that the woman has a right to a private examination room, and that the HPV test might be taken by a male or female health provider (whichever is the case).
- Allow the woman to see and touch the HPV test materials, which may help reduce fear and anxiety.
- Waiting for the HPV test result can cause distress and anxiety. Minimize any delays in providing HPV test results.
- Clearly communicate the HPV test results and what they mean for the woman. Make sure that the woman understands the information provided about her HPV test result.

Using Mass Media

Information about HPV and cervical cancer provided to the public through mass media can have a great impact on the way HPV testing is perceived by women, health professionals, and the general public. Prior to rolling out the HPV test-based screening program, contact the different media outlets in the area, especially newspapers and radio, and provide journalists with basic information about HPV, HPV testing, cervical cancer, and the epidemiological situation in the country/region.

Counseling Strategies

Counseling is a strategy for interpersonal communication between the health provider and the woman. It allows women to become more informed and knowledgeable about HPV and cervical cancer prevention and encourages them to adopt preventive practices. Counseling can be done individually, or in groups. Individual counseling is suggested for cervical cancer prevention, since sensitive topics, such as sexuality, disease, and death will be discussed. These topics can cause anxiety, fear, and embarrassment in women. Therefore, a private space needs to be used during counseling to create an environment of trust and confidentiality.

Counseling is based on active listening by the health provider. It is an opportunity for women to ask and be asked questions, and to put into words her fears and anxieties related to HPV testing and cervical cancer

prevention. Counseling is done without judgment, and to build new knowledge and confidence in women to support HPV testing and promote health seeking behaviors.

Counseling can begin with a discussion about the woman’s knowledge of HPV and cervical cancer, and her experience with gynecological examinations. It is important to listen to the woman’s doubts, fears, and concerns and provide her with information in clear and straightforward language.

Counseling can be done in a fixed space in a health facility, or in a space that is created for counseling at another location where health services are offered. Counseling can be done during communication and outreach activities, during home visits, at health facilities, among other locations.

Communicating HPV test results

At the time of receiving her HPV test result, a woman may feel a high level of stress. When the test result is HPV positive, she may feel fear, shame, guilt, and other feelings. These emotions can have an impact on whether the woman adheres to the referral for diagnostic and treatment services. Therefore, the most important moment for counseling is at the time of providing HPV test results to women. It is important to deliver the HPV test results in a calm and non-judgmental manner, and to minimize any fears and anxiety. The woman could be probed for any doubts or questions about what the HPV test result means for her.

All women have the right to receive their HPV test results in a timely manner. Women should receive their HPV test result in less than 30 days of sample collection, whether the result is HPV negative or HPV positive.

Counseling is also required during the follow-up and treatment services. It is important to convey information about the procedures to women, how the procedures will be done and what the intended outcomes are of the procedures.

WHO PROVIDES COUNSELING	COUNSELING SKILLS	PRINCIPLES FOR COUNSELING	TOPICS FOR COUNSELING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained health providers: physicians, nurses, and social workers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Active listening, clear language, command of nonverbal communication. Paraphrase to clarify, identify, and reflect feelings. Formulate meaningful questions. Empathy, comprehension, discretion, social skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respect. Non-judgmental. Privacy. Truthfulness. Confidentiality. Open mindedness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reproductive health anatomy. HPV and HPV infection. HPV testing. Cervical cancer prevention. Follow-up and treatment.