

# SECTION 10: HPV TESTING USING SELF-SAMPLING

## KEY MESSAGES

- One of the advantages of HPV testing is that it can be done by the woman herself, without undergoing a gynecological examination.
- HPV self-sampling has high sensitivity and specificity, similar to that of HPV testing conducted by a physician or nurse.

## ADVANTAGES OF HPV SELF-SAMPLING

One of the advantages of HPV testing is that it is the only screening test that can be done with a vaginal sample taken by the woman herself. HPV test sensitivity and specificity using a vaginal sample, taken by the patient, is similar to that taken by a health provider (Lazcano-Ponce E *et al.* 2011).

HPV self-sampling is widely accepted in countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Studies in China, Uganda, India, Nicaragua (even among the indigenous population in the Masaya region) have shown that acceptance by women for HPV self-sampling is high (Jeronimo J *et al.* 2014).

Health workers may be resistant to an HPV test-based screening program that relies on HPV self-sampling. This may be due to the uncertainties about the woman's acceptability and quality of the sample for testing. But it is important for health workers to understand that HPV infection is not limited to the cervical epithelium, and that the infection can also be in the vagina, vulva, and even the anal region. Therefore, even if the self-sample does not collect an adequate amount of cells from the cervix, a sample of vaginal cells will be sufficient to determine whether or not the woman has an HPV infection.

Another advantage of HPV self-sampling is that it can increase screening coverage. This is because it does not require women to go to a health service and can be done in the convenience of a woman's home, or in community settings that offer sufficient privacy. Women can take the HPV test, send the sample by mail to the health center or laboratory for processing, and the health workers at the health center can then contact them to provide results or schedule an appointment for further evaluation.

Many women choose not to undergo a gynecological examination, for many reasons including modesty, or unwillingness to be examined by a male health provider. HPV self-sampling helps to overcome these barriers.

HPV self-sampling can also facilitate cervical screening in health centers where there is limited capacity for screening, such as no physicians, no gynecological tables or no vaginal specula.

### ***Eligibility for HPV self-sampling***

All women in the screening program's target age group are eligible for HPV self-sampling, if they agree and understand the instructions. Although acceptability by women for HPV self-sampling is high, there are women who may prefer that a health provider take the cervical sample. The most common reasons a women rejects HPV self-sampling are (Bansil P *et al.* 2014):

- Fear of hurting herself. Appropriate counseling can alleviate a woman's fear, although the health provider may have to take the sample if the patient is still afraid and does not agree to take the sample herself.
- Fear that the sample will not be of good quality. Appropriate counseling can relieve a woman's uncertainty.
- Resistance to touching her genitals.
- Fear of not using the sampling brush or tube properly. Appropriate training of women can decrease this fear.

### ***Instructions for HPV self-sampling***

It is important that instructions on how to take the HPV self-sample are explained in a simple, straightforward way, ideally with visual aids. It is important to consider the cultural and social characteristics of the populations, and be aware that some women may feel offended by the illustrations showing how to collect a sample for HPV testing.

### ***Training health providers on HPV self-sampling***

All health providers that will offer women the choice of a self-sampled HPV test should be well informed about this procedure. Health providers need to understand the procedure and be prepared to discuss it with women and answer any questions or concerns they may have.

Topics to address during training include the natural history cervical cancer, emphasizing that HPV infection is very common, HPV testing and the advantages of HPV self-sampling. Additional information to give health providers is as follows:

- Information about the supplies used in HPV self-sampling.
- Eligibility for HPV testing and self-sampling.
- Instructions for how to take a self-sample, label the collection tube and where to send it for processing.
- The meaning of HPV positive and HPV negative results.
- Follow-up steps for women with HPV positive results.
- Specific instructions for the woman doing self-sampling.

### ***Reporting results to women***

It is necessary to develop appropriate and timely strategies to inform women about their HPV test result in a timely manner. If the sample was taken at the health center, the woman can be asked to return at a

predetermined date to receive the result. If the woman took the sample at her home, community health workers can contact women at their home to deliver the results. HPV test results are private and need to be only be given to the woman directly, and not discussed with anyone else. Protection of privacy is important, especially given the possibility that community health workers may have close community relationships with the patient and her family.

***Follow-up of women with HPV positive results***

HPV self-sampling has the advantage that women can take the test by themselves without having to go to a health facility and undergoing a gynecological examination. However, if the HPV test result is positive, the woman will need to go to the health center for further follow-up care. Therefore, if HPV self-sampling will be used as a strategy in the program, it is necessary to build in systems to ensure all women with positive test results will receive follow-up. This includes providing women with appropriate counseling and education so that they understand the need to complete the required follow-up steps, after a positive test result.