

European Cervical Cancer Association Key Messages on HPV and Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer key figures

- Worldwide, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women after breast cancer. About 500,000 women develop cervical cancer and 250,000 die from it every year. Most cases of cervical cancer occur in areas of the world where there is no screening or the screening is not effective.
- In countries that have effective cervical screening programmes, cervical cancer is about the 10th most common cancer in women.
- In Europe as a whole, about 50,000 women develop cervical cancer and almost 25,000 women die from this disease every year. More than half of these cases could be prevented by regular screening.

Cervical cancer screening

- Cervical cancer screening currently offers the best protection against cervical cancer if it is repeated regularly every X years as recommended by <<national/regional authority>>
- Cervical cancer screening helps to prevent cervical cancer by finding abnormal cervical cells so that they can be removed if necessary before they have a chance to develop into a cancer.
- Most women with a mildly abnormal Pap smear result will not have cervical cells that need to be removed because the majority of abnormal cervical cells disappear on their own. Sometimes, the abnormal cells will not disappear or they will be severely abnormal and a closer examination of your cervix, called a colposcopy, will be required.
- Having a colposcopy is very similar to having a Pap smear taken except that a special microscope, called a colposcope, will be used to examine the cervix more closely. This will not cause any additional discomfort as the colposcopy says outside the vagina.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) – as the cause of cervical cancer

- Cervical cancer is caused by certain types of the Human papillomavirus (HPV)
- There are more than 100 types of HPV. Some types cause warts on the hands or feet. Other types infect the genital area of both men and women, and are called genital HPVs. Some genital HPVs can cause genital warts and others can lead to cervical cancer. (This point could be supported by a diagram or illustration). The HPV types that cause genital warts do not cause cervical cancer and women with genital warts do not need to be screened more frequently.
- In most women who get HPV, it will disappear in about 6-24 months. Once the HPV has disappeared, the risk for developing cervical cancer is very low.
- Cigarette smoking appears to delay or prevent the disappearance of HPV and increase the risk for cervical cancer.
- HPV can cause abnormal cervical cells on a Pap smear. Usually, both the HPV and the abnormal cells will disappear without treatment. If the abnormal cells do not disappear or are severely abnormal, there is a greater chance of cervical cancer developing and they should be removed by a <<doctor/gynaecologist/etc.>>
- Regular cervical screening is the best way to find any abnormal cervical cells that may be present. Once detected, any that do not disappear on their own or are severely abnormal can usually be easily removed in the << doctor's office/gynaecologist's office/outpatient clinic>>.

Genital Human Papillomavirus (HPV) – as a sexually transmitted virus

- Genital HPV is generally caught by sexual contact.
- HPV is very common. All adults are likely to have had HPV at some time in their lives but most will have cleared the virus without ever knowing they had it.
- Although condoms are very effective in preventing other sexually transmitted infections, they are not as effective in preventing HPV, probably because HPV can be found on skin not covered by the condoms.
- HPV rarely produces any symptoms – people can have HPV and never know it.
- HPV can remain – without any symptoms – for many years and it is usually very difficult to know when the infection occurred or who it came from

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- There is no treatment for HPV itself but it usually disappears on its own. If it leads to the development of abnormal cervical cells, these usually disappear as well, once the HPV has cleared. Abnormal cells which do not disappear or are severely abnormal should be removed as they increase the chances of cervical cancer developing.
- HPV testing for men is still under development. There are currently no tests that can accurately determine if a man has HPV because HPV can be found anywhere in the genital area and it is not possible to tell if a negative test result means that the man has no infection at all or if it is just because the sample was taken from an area that was not infected.

Cervical cancer development

- Cervical cancer is believed to take a long time to develop, perhaps as long as 5-15 years after a woman first gets HPV, and to develop only if the HPV does not disappear on its own during this time. However, most women who get HPV will clear the infection in 6 to 24 months. Once the HPV has gone, the risk for developing cervical cancer is very low.
- HPV infections that do not disappear can produce abnormal cervical cells that may progress to cervical cancer if they are not treated. These abnormal cells cause no obvious symptoms and regular cervical screening is the best way to find any that may be present.
- Abnormal cells which do not disappear or are severely abnormal should be removed as they increase the chances of cervical cancer developing.

Treatment of abnormal cervical cells

- Follow-up of an abnormal Pap smear may find abnormal cervical cells that need to be removed. This can usually be done in the << doctor's office/gynaecologist's office/outpatient clinic>> and is very effective.

HPV testing

- HPV testing has been suggested for three possible uses in cervical cancer prevention:
 - As a screening test together with the Pap smear for women 30 years of age or older
 - As a test for the follow-up of women after minor cervical cell abnormalities have been found on her Pap smear to help the <healthcare provider, etc.> decide if further treatment is required or not
 - For the follow-up of women who have been treated for cervical cell abnormalities to help assess the success of the treatment.
- HPV is very common in women under the age of 30 but usually disappears on its own. Therefore, it is not thought that HPV testing will be useful for women under 30 because it would find too many infections that will clear without any problems.
- HPV testing has not been approved for cervical cancer screening anywhere in Europe at this time, although this use is being actively studied in a number of countries. HPV testing for the follow-up of women after they have had a mildly abnormal Pap smear has been approved in some countries while others are still studying if this will work within their screening programmes.

HPV vaccination

- Vaccines to prevent cervical cancer are currently being investigated in clinical trials and have shown very good results. If these trials continue to go well, it is likely that the first vaccines against HPV will be available within the next couple of years.
- These vaccines are designed to prevent people from getting HPV in the first place. Because HPV is so common, women who have already commenced sexual activity are likely to have been exposed and will need to rely on regular screening to prevent cervical cancer.
- Both vaccines have been designed to offer protection against infection by the 2 most common types of HPV, which are responsible for about 2/3 of cervical cancers and many cases of abnormal cervical cells. Neither vaccine will protect against all the types of HPV that cause abnormal cervical cells or cervical cancers, and they will not eliminate the need for regular cervical screening.