

## Key facts

- Cervical cancer is a malignant tumour on cells of the cervix, the lowest part of the uterus mostly caused by Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).
- It is usually slow growing cancer that may not have symptoms till it reaches an advanced stage but can be detected earlier using screening methods.
- HPV is mainly transmitted through sexual contact and most people are infected with HPV shortly after the onset of sexual activity.
- In Malawi, of all the female cancers, cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer deaths and has the highest incidence rate.
- HIV increases the risk of cervical cancer
- Comprehensive cervical cancer control includes primary prevention (vaccination against HPV), secondary prevention (screening and treatment of pre-cancerous lesions), tertiary prevention (diagnosis and treatment of invasive cervical cancer) and palliative care.
- Vaccines that protect against some types of HPV are recommended and approved for use by WHO and many countries.
- Screening and treatment of pre-cancer lesions in women of 25 years and more is a cost-effective way to prevent cervical cancer.
- HPV vaccines are very safe and very effective in preventing cervical cancer.
- Cervical cancer can be cured if diagnosed at an early stage.
- All women are at risk of developing cervical cancer regardless of their HIV status.
- Girls abstain from early sexual debut and young women abstain from sex with multiple partners.

## What are the signs and Symptoms of cervical cancer?

It is usually asymptomatic till the condition is at an advanced stage at which she may presents with:

- Pain and Bleeding after sexual intercourse
- Unexplained or abnormal vaginal bleeding.
- Abnormal vaginal discharge.
- Backache and painful legs
- Swelling of a leg or both lower extremities
- Lower abdominal pains
- Urinary problems

## What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the virus that causes cervical cancer and other infections like genital warts in the reproductive tract.

HPV is sexually transmitted and skin to skin genital contact also a recognized mode of transmission

## What are the risk factors for cervical cancer?

- Multiple sexual partners
- Low immunity due to HIV and other factors
- Early sexual debut
- Smoking
- High parity (number of babies born) and young age at first birth

## What it is the Magnitude of cervical cancer?

Worldwide, cervical cancer is the fourth most frequent cancer in women. It is the fourth leading cause of cancer deaths with most of the deaths occurring in the developing countries.

In Malawi, cervical cancer has the highest incidence rate of all female cancers and the highest mortality rate.

| Primary prevention                                                                                                                                          | Secondary prevention                                                                        | Tertiary prevention                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Girls 9-14 years                                                                                                                                            | Women 25 years old or older                                                                 | All women as needed                                                                                                                                                               |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• HPV vaccination</li><li>• Health information and warnings about tobacco use</li><li>• Sexuality education</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Screen and treat" - single visit approach</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Care and Treatment of invasive cancer</li><li>• Surgery</li><li>• Radiotherapy</li><li>• Chemotherapy</li><li>• Palliative care</li></ul> |

## What are the Existing Cervical cancer Control and Preventive Approaches?

### What is HPV vaccination?

- HPV vaccine can prevent occurrence of cervical cancer.
- HPV vaccines are very safe and very effective in preventing infections caused by HPV

- HPV vaccines work best if administered prior to exposure to HPV.
- The vaccines cannot treat an HPV infected cervix or cervical cancer.
- WHO recommends vaccination for girls aged between 9 and 14 years when most have not started sexual activity, as this is the most cost-effective public health measure against cervical cancer.
- HPV vaccination does not replace cervical cancer screening.

#### **Screening and treatment of pre-cancer lesions**

Cervical cancer screening involves testing for pre-cancer and cancer among women who have no symptoms and may feel perfectly healthy. When screening detects pre-cancerous lesions, these can easily be treated, and cancer can be avoided. Screening can also detect cancer at an early stage and treatment has a high potential for cure.

For women living with HIV who are sexually active, screening should be done earlier, as soon as they know their HIV status.

Screening and treatment methods are available in most government and mission (CHAM) facilities.

All women should get screened subsequently as advised by health care personnel depending on their HIV status.

#### **What role can I play in cervical cancer management?**

- Political leaders should allocate adequate funding to cervical cancer program and encourage women to go for screening and treatment services
- Religious leaders should encourage women and community members to access vaccination, screening and treatment services
- Community leaders encourage community members to access HPV and cervical cancer services
- Men should be actively involved and encourage women to access cervical cancer services
- Health Management leaders should ensure service provision is consistent and accessible to all women in their institutions
- Health workers should direct clients on where to get cervical cancer services and provide information regarding cervical cancer.
- Women should share cervical cancer facts, services to fellow women and other community members.

