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# Cervical Cancer: What One Should Be Aware Of

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Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among women in India. It's also the fourth most common cancer in women globally. A type of cancer when detected in early stage can be completely treated. Another fact about cervical cancer is that most of such cases can be prevented. So, now if as we have your attention, we would like you to know a little more about it.

### What is cervical cancer

Let's start with basics!

Cervical cancer is a type of cancer that affects the cervix – the lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina. Although it is a dangerous disease, the death rates have dropped by at least 50 per cent in the last four decades due to increased awareness, screening, and increased vaccine acceptance. It is most often diagnosed in women between the ages of 25-65 with the average age being 50. One thing needs to be noted - all women are at risk for cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer first becomes precancerous when there are mutations to the cells in the cervix. Once these precancerous cells begin to multiply out of control, the cancer spreads to the other cells nearby, attacking large groups of tissues and subsequently growing into a tumor. Generally, this transition from the precancerous stage to cancer can take a few years, so early detection can prove to be very useful in treating cervical cancer.

### **What are the causes of cervical cancer**

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and its strains, a sexually transmitted infection are considered to be the cause of most cases of the cervical cancer cases. Sometimes, other factors like smoking, multiple sexual partners, taking birth control pills for extended durations, low immunity, child birth or an HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases could also cause cervical cancer.

### **How can cervical cancer be detected?**

Regular screening tests can help in the early detection of cervical cancer. There are two types of tests that can detect cervical cancer - the Pap smear Test and the HPV test. Getting tested once in three years by Pap smear test and once in 5 years by HPV test can prove to be very helpful in early diagnosis since these tests are considered to be the most reliable when it comes to the early detection of cervical cancer.

Generally, symptoms are not present in the earlier stages of cervical cancer. By the time clear signs like vaginal discharge, irregular periods, bleeding, problems while urinating, swollen inner thighs and pelvic pain appear, the cancer could've advanced.

### **What are the signs and symptoms to watch for**

Women in early stage of cervical cancer may not experience any symptom altogether. That's the main reason regular screening is encouraged to catch any such condition early. Other than that, some symptoms that may ask for attention are:

- Pain in the pelvic region
- Abnormal vaginal discharge, sometimes with blood between the periods or after menopause
- Bleeding post sexual intercourse
- Abnormal vaginal discharge with odour

### **When to get screened for cervical cancer**

Ideally it is recommended that a female should start getting screened for cervical cancer at an age of 25 years. As recommended by American Cancer Society, cervical cancer screening should be done every 5 years from 25 years until 65 years via HPV testing.

In case when HPV testing is not readily available one can also undergo HPV/Pap cotest in a frequency of 5 years or at least a Pap test every 3 years.

### **How can its risk be reduced**

Being diagnosed with cancer is something that is unfortunately, not in our control. However, we could reduce the risk by getting cervical cancer vaccine early, avoiding tobacco use, practicing safe sex, understanding our body's changes and have regular screening tests.

### **Who should get HPV vaccination**

Advisory committee on immunisation practices (ACIP) recommends HPV vaccination at age 11 or 12 years and vaccination can be started at age 9 years. HPV vaccination is recommended for all persons through age 26 years who were not adequately vaccinated earlier and not sexually active.

### **Cervical cancer and the pandemic**

It is necessary to get checked regularly in order to detect cancer, if present. The current situation, however, makes it difficult for most women to get timely appointments with physicians. Connecting with medical practitioners online and sharing concerns could be one way out of this predicament.

Due to the raging pandemic, many women have been refraining from visiting hospitals for their routine checkups or for getting their symptoms checked by physicians. In fact, in many countries, it has also become difficult to make appointments to meet physicians, since most have been reallocated to treat those with Covid-19.

WHO has noted that the pandemic can impact cancer screening. One way to solve this issue is to get vaccinated against HPV. Many campaigns have been started to ensure HPV vaccines are made available to all women above the age of 20, raise awareness about cervical cancer and to provide the necessary tools to healthcare providers to address vaccine misinformation.

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