

Women's Cancers Early Detection Saves Lives

Cancer of the Cervix

Cancer of the cervix is the most common cancer in Zimbabwean women. Although originally most prevalent in women over 40, it now occurs in younger women. If it is detected early, through a pap smear or visual inspection with acetic acid, it is largely a curable disease.

What causes cancer of the cervix?

Causes are unknown but the major suspected causative agent is a virus called the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which causes warts and is sexually transmitted. It is suspected to speed up the growth of cancer cells in the cervix.

The following are the risk factors :

- Multiple sexual partners increase the risk of picking up the human papilloma virus.
- Harmful cultural practices of using agents, herbs or chemicals inserted into the vaginal canal for sexual enhancement or to hasten childbirth.
- Smoking.
- Where a woman has more than four children, she is more predisposed to human papilloma virus infection.
- Early sexual activity in adolescence.
- Lack of access to cervical screening services reduces chances of early detection.

Symptoms For women who are still having periods:

- Increased menstrual bleeding.
- Abnormal vaginal discharge.
- Blood stained vaginal discharge, which does not respond to treatment.
- Painless vaginal bleeding between periods.
- Painless vaginal bleeding after sexual intercourse.
- Moderate pain during sexual intercourse.

In post-menopausal women :

- Bleeding vaginally after sexual intercourse.
- Any vaginal bleeding.
- Abnormal foul smelling vaginal discharge.
- Pain during sexual intercourse.

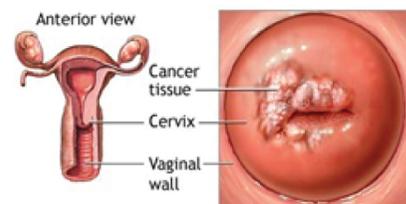
Symptoms of advanced cervical cancer may include:

- Leaking of urine or faeces from the vagina.
- Persistent offensive, watery foul smelling vaginal discharge, which does not respond to treatment.
- Pain in the lower abdomen or back.
- Bleeding between periods, after sexual intercourse.
- Heavy bleeding from the vagina.
- Due to loss of blood some may become anaemic.
- Loss of appetite and weight, Fatigue.

How is cancer of the cervix prevented:

- Abstinence from sex especially before twenty years of age.
- Sticking to one faithful partner.
- Practicing safe sex through use of barrier methods (condoms) to avoid infections.
- Avoid inserting herbs, chemicals or agents into the vagina.
- No smoking.
- Get prompt treatment of sexually transmitted infections.

Above all, women who are sexually active need to be screened for cancer of the cervix yearly or according to doctors' recommendations. Screening tests such as VIAC and Pap smears are available at most family planning clinics, municipality city health clinics, well woman clinics and some doctors.



Cervix viewed through speculum during a pelvic exam



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For more information on cancers and cancer prevention, call the Cancer Association on: telephone numbers 707444/, 705522, 707673 or email us on: cancer@mweb.co.zw. or visit our website : www.cancerassociation.co.zw

Breast Cancer

The cause of breast cancer is unknown but there are high risk factors which may predispose women to develop breast cancer. It is the second most common cancer in black women in Zimbabwe, the highest being cancer of the cervix.

Risk of breast cancer increases if one :

- Is 40 or older; however younger women and men can also contract breast cancer.
- Has a mother, sister, or daughter or aunt who has had breast cancer. The risk increases if the breast cancer occurred before menopause.
- Started menstrual periods early below 12 years and going into menopause late, over 55 years of age.
- Has had no children or having the first child later than 30 years.
- Consumes a diet that is high in animal fat.
- Smokes and drinks alcohol.
- Is overweight
- Has had cancer in one breast; this predisposes the other breast to develop cancer.

The importance of breast self-examination:

- It makes one become familiar with the usual appearance and feel of one's breasts.
- Getting to know one's breasts makes it easier to become aware of any changes.
- Early detection of abnormalities gives the doctor a better chance to offer effective treatment.

You should examine your breasts from the age of eighteen onwards. Women undergoing their menstrual periods are encouraged to do breast self-examinations three to five days after one's period when breasts are less likely to be tender and swollen. Men as well

as women at menopause should choose a particular day of the month when to do breast self-examination. The best way to do this is while standing up looking into the mirror, standing up in the shower or lying down on the bed.

What to look for

On the breast itself:

- Change in size or shape.
- Dimpling on the skin over the breast or puckering.
- Enlarged veins or darkened veins.
- A lump or thickening which could be painless.
- Unusual rash over the breast.
- Persistent pain in the breast though this is not usual .

On the nipple:

- Discharge which could be blood stained.
- Rash around the nipple.
- Inverted nipple (turned in nipple).
- Change in the position of the nipple.
- Lump or thickening on the nipple.

Upper arm :

- There could be swelling or lumps.
- Swelling or lumps in the armpit.

Some ways of preventing breast cancer:

- Eat a diet low in animal fat
- Eat a diet high in fibre including fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Avoid fast, oily and sugary foods,
- Exercise regularly, such as purposeful walking for about thirty minutes three times a week.
- Avoid being overweight.
- Avoid smoking and drinking.
- Breast feeding is protective.
- Manage stress positively.

One way of breast self-examination:

1. Stand before the mirror, inspect both breasts for any unusual discharge, dimpling, scaling, puckering, of the skin.



2. Watching in the mirror, clasp hands behind head and press head against hands. This helps to identify any changes in the shape or size as the muscles contract.



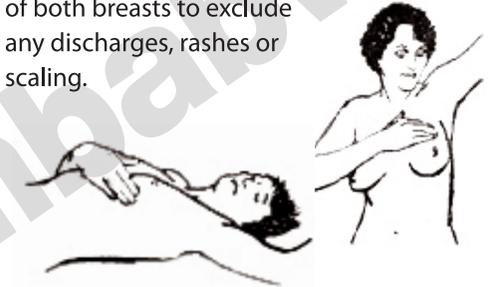
3. Press hands on the hips and bend towards the front or mirror while pulling shoulders and elbows forward. The pulling of muscles helps to identify any abnormalities on the breasts.



4. While in the shower, with soapy hands, lift arm and with four fingers of your right hand, gradually work from the outer edge of the breast in small circles towards the nipple. The circular movements will help identify any lumps or abnormalities. Following the same process use your left hand to examine the right breast.



5. Closely look at the nipples of both breasts to exclude any discharges, rashes or scaling.



6. Step 4 and 5 should be repeated lying down on the back. With the left arm over the head, use the right arm to examine the left breast. With the right arm over the head, use the left hand to examine the right breast. The position flattens the breasts making it easier to examine the breasts for any abnormalities.

7. Nurse counselors at the Cancer Association of Zimbabwe or health workers at your nearest health facility are always helpful in teaching ladies how to do breast self-examination. Call and make an appointment.

What do you do when you find a change in your breast?

A lump does not mean that you have breast cancer. Many lumps are not cancerous, but the Cancer Association will help to refer you to have the abnormality checked out by relevant specialists.

“Early detection saves lives, self-examination could save your life”