

Cervical cancer month: Cervical cancer is the most common cancer among women in South Africa

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Although September is cervical cancer awareness month, awareness should not be limited to this month alone.

By 2030, all cancers are expected to kill almost 12 million people globally - approximately double the projected deaths from HIV and AIDS. Globally, this disease kills around 260 000 women each year, and over 1 million women currently suffer from it.

But there is hope- cervical cancer can be prevented. Most cervical cancers are curable if detected and treated in the early stages. . However, today it remains the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in South African women.

Worldwide the majority of women suffering from this disease remain undiagnosed and unaware that their lives are at risk. Left untreated, cervical cancer is almost always fatal, so it's essential that South African women realise the importance of regular screening in order to catch the disease early.

Research in South Africa suggests that the majority of women obtain a diagnosis only once the disease has already reached an advanced stage; at which point the cure rates are low.

South African women need to become more aware that a simple screening process can detect abnormalities in the cervix. If these abnormalities (pre-cancerous stage) are picked up early and treated, cancer can in fact be prevented before it develops. A pap smear is a painless screening procedure used to collect cells from the cervix, which aims to detect precancerous changes in the cervix, which could lead to cancer if untreated.

Because cervical cancer is rare in women under the age of 30, the World Health Organisation recommends that screening begin at the age of 25 and be repeated every three years. For over-50s, screening is recommended every five years, and is no longer necessary once you reach 65 if your last two tests have been negative. Pap smears are not recommended while pregnant, menstruating or if you are suffering from an infection.

Research at one South African hospital suggests that 80% of women have never had a pap smear. If you are over 25 years of age and haven't yet been screened for cervical cancer, don't ignore the window of opportunity to identify and treat any cervical abnormalities before they progress further.

In addition to the secondary prevention offered by cervical cancer screening, women and girls from nine to 26 years of age now also have the option of primary prevention. Vaccines targeting the main cause of cervical cancer - a common virus called human papillomavirus (HPV) - are now available. These include the Quadrivalent Human Papillomavirus (Types 6, 11, 16 & 18) Recombinant Vaccine that helps prevent four strains of HPV, thus helping to prevent both cervical cancer and genital warts. There is also a bivalent HPV vaccine available which only targets HPV types 16 & 18.

"Although September is cervical cancer awareness month, awareness should not be limited to this month alone. Do everything you can to let the women in your life know that cervical cancer can affect any South African woman," urges Dr Trudy Smith, Specialist Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, Principal Specialist & Senior Lecturer University of Witwatersrand.

"Do everything you can to help them understand that the chances of curing cervical cancer are closely related to the stage of the disease when it is diagnosed. I shall do everything I can to inform my patients of the preventative vaccines and painless screening process that could help prevent them becoming another cervical cancer statistic," concludes Dr Smith.

The quadrivalent HPV vaccine is also indicated for boys between the ages of 9 and 17. Whilst men cannot contract cervical cancer, they could be carriers of HPV and could potentially contract genital warts as well as anal and penile cancers later in life. Therefore if a young boy receives the quadrivalent HPV vaccination not only will he be protected against spreading four types of HPV to his future partners, he will also be protected against developing genital warts and other males genital cancers associated with HPV.

For more information call 0860 HPV HPV or visit: www.tell-someone.co.za

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