

**QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED BY THE COMMUNITY TO CERVICAL CANCER
PEER EDUCATORS IN ZAMBIA**



**“EVERY WOMAN HAS THE RIGHT TO LIVE A LIFE FREE FROM
CANCER OF THE CERVIX”**

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Preface

This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) handbook is designed as a simple tool to support the work of Cervical Cancer Peer Educators and other community level workers in their daily work of cervical cancer sensitization. Since January 2006, peer educators working with the Cervical Prevention Programme in Zambia have been asked a variety of questions ranging from cervical cancer specific issues to general questions on cancer and sexual health. They have also encountered myths and misconceptions.

We would like to thank all the Cervical Cancer Peer Educators for compiling and sharing these questions. In a special way we would like to thank Susan Chirwa Simfukwe, Mercy Chilembo, Barbra Nakasote and Susan Namuswa for compiling the questions. To Prof. Groesbeck Parham, Dr. Mulindi Mwanahamuntu, Dr. Sharon Kapambwe and Enelesi Lungu for responding to the various medical issues raised.

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1. General questions

1.1 What is cancer?

- A. Cancer is an abnormal growth of cells in the body. Not all growths are cancerous. For example, fibroid tumors are not cancerous. Those that can spread to other parts of the body and cause problems are called cancer.

1.2 Do family planning methods cause any type of cancer?

- A. Condoms and intrauterine devices do not cause cancer. No one really knows if oral or injectable contraceptives cause cancer. However, if there is a risk it is minimal so there is no reason for women to stop using oral or injectable contraceptives because the benefits outweigh the risks.

1.3 What causes prostate cancer in men?

- A. The male prostate gland is an organ just beneath the bladder. The purpose of the prostate gland is to store and secrete a fluid that makes up about 30% of the semen. Prostate cancer happens when cells of the prostate gland undergo rapid changes and start dividing out of control. Factors that lead to prostate cancer include diet rich in animal fats (meat, eggs, dairy products) and low in fruits, vegetables, beans and grains, and family history of the disease.

1.4 I have a bloody vaginal discharge after sexual intercourse. What could it be?

- A. It could be related to an infection, damage to your vagina that occurred during sex or even a cancer. It's definitely something you should have checked by a health professional. Do not wait until it gets more serious.

1.5 Is it normal to have your menses after every 6 days or twice in a month?

- A. No. Ordinarily, a woman should have her period once a month (approximately every 28 days).

1.6 Are the cervix and the womb the same?

- A. No. The womb (uterus) is made up of two parts, the body and the opening. The opening is also called the cervix. It is also described as the 'door' or 'mouth' of the womb.

1.7 My grandmother had cancer. Can I have it as well?

- A. Some cancers can be inherited such as breast and prostate cancer. However, cervical cancer is usually not inherited.

1.8 What causes warts, is there any treatment and/or are they curable?

- A. Genital warts are caused by a virus that is named the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). Warts can be treated using medicine, or they be removed with surgery. Warts are difficult to get rid of and usually come back after treatment so they need to be treated each time they re-appear.

1.9 Do you also do VCT (Voluntary Counseling and Testing) in your cervical cancer screening clinics?

Yes, we offer HIV testing in all of our clinics.

2. HPV issues

2.1 What is HPV?

- A. HPV stands for Human Papillomavirus. This is the virus that causes warts or cancerous growths on different parts of the body. There are certain types of HPV that can cause warts or cancerous growths around the anus of a man or woman, the penis of a man or the vagina, vulva or cervix of a woman.

2.2 What are the origins of HPV?

- A. We don't know where HPV came from. It's been around for millions of years. The important thing to know is that both women and men can carry and pass the virus between one another, and it can cause cervical cancer in women.

2.3 Are all cancers caused by HPV?

- A. HPV can cause cancers of the vagina, vulva, cervix, anus, head and neck, penis and lung but the most common cancer it causes is cancer of the cervix.

2.4 After I am treated for pre-cancer or cancer of the cervix, is the HPV still active in the cervix?

- A. There is no treatment for HPV at this time. What the healthcare professionals treat are the precancers and cancers that are caused by HPV. Treatment of the precancers and cancers will reduce the amount of HPV in the cervix and may even get rid of it, but sometimes it does not.

2.5 What does the cervix contain that attracts the HPV?

- A. The cervix has an area called the transformation zone where there are constant changes taking place in the cells. This is the area that HPV targets in order for cancer to develop.

2.6 Is HPV related to STIs?

- A. HPV is predominantly a sexually transmitted virus and tends to be associated with other common STIs.

2.7 Why isn't there a permanent prevention for the HPV, so that women would not be infected?

- A. Currently, an HPV vaccine has been developed, although it is not yet available to many women. In the meantime, partial prevention of HPV can be done by the use of condoms, male circumcision and by sticking to one sexual partner.

2.8 Instead of treating the women, why can't you treat men for the HPV virus so they don't infect other women?

- A. Please note that HPV is carried by both men and women. Men alone are not the problem. Women give HPV to men and men give HPV to women. However, there is no test for HPV in men and presently there is no treatment for HPV in men or women. What both men and women can do is maintain one sexual partner and use condoms to help prevent infecting each other with HPV.

2.9 How can we help men control HPV?

- A. All men should be encouraged to stick to one sexual partner and to use condoms. Sticking to one sexual partner reduces the risks of a man acquiring HPV from different women and re-infecting his partners.

2.10 How safe is the male condom if the virus can be carried on the skin covering the testicles?

- A. Male condoms are not 100% safe, but it does offer some protection against HPV, and other sexually transmitted infections like syphilis, and HIV. Some protection offered by condoms is better than none at all.

2.11 Why don't men develop cancer of the penis after infection with the virus (HPV) and how would they know that they have the virus?

- A. The answer to this question is not yet known. Currently there's no test that's been approved to find HPV in men, so a man would not know that he has HPV unless he gets a wart on his penis.

2.12 What has been done to help men stop spreading the HPV?

- A. Community education on male involvement in prevention of cancer of the cervix.

2.13 Why does the HPV develop into cancer in women and not in men?

A. In healthy individuals, HPV usually clears away on its own. The reason why it does not cause cancer in men is not yet known.

2.14 Does the HPV have any effect in men who are HIV positive?

A. HPV is the cause of genital warts, so in men with HIV, genital warts are likely to occur after persistent HPV infection.

2.15 Are fibroids caused by the Human Papillomavirus?

A. No, fibroids are non-cancerous growths in the uterus.

3 General questions on cervical cancer

3.1 What is the difference between precancer and cancer?

A. Precancer is an abnormal growth of cells on the surface of the cervix. Real cancer (invasive cancer) is an abnormal growth of cells deep that has grown deep down into the tissues of the cervix, like the roots of a plant. First a woman gets an HPV infection which then changes into a precancer which later turns into a real (invasive) cancer.

3.2 How can a young woman 18 years old be found with invasive cervical cancer when it usually takes 10~20 years for cervical cancer to develop.

A. This can happen if a young woman starts having unprotected sex at a very young age, especially if she has had many different sexual partners in her lifetime. HIV infection can also make cervical cancer occur at young ages.

3.3 Can I have a baby if I am found with cancer or pre-cancer cells?

A. It depends on whether you have been treated for the cancer or pre-cancer. If you have been treated for pre-cancer and your cervix has healed well, you should be able to have a baby. If you have been treated for real cancer (invasive cancer) with surgery you won't be able to have a baby because the treatment requires removal of your cervix. You won't be able to get pregnant after radiation because it causes scar tissue to form in the cervix.

3.4 Why doesn't cervical pre-cancer cause symptoms?

A. Cervical pre-cancer has no symptoms therefore the best time to go in for screening is when you are feeling fine and are not having any symptoms. Real cancers often cause bleeding or continuous vaginal discharge.

3.5 Is cervical cancer really curable or do you just contain and control it?

A. If found early, cervical cancer can be cured. The earlier the cancer is found, the better your chance of being cured. That is why women should be screened so that if there is a cancer, it is found before it has spread.

3.6 How else can I know I have cervical cancer apart from being screened?

A. The only way to know that you have cervical cancer is by getting screened by a health professional. The purpose of screening is to make sure you are healthy and to catch the problem early.

3.7 What are the signs and symptoms of real cervical cancer?

- Bleeding in between periods
- Bleeding after sex (post-coital bleeding)
- A foul smelling discharge from the vagina that won't go away after treatment with medication
- Lower abdominal pain
- Post-menopausal bleeding
- Severe backache
- Weight loss

3.8 What other factors can also cause smelly vaginal discharge, bleeding after sex, and bleeding in-between menses, apart from cancer of the cervix?

A. Vaginal infections, hormonal problems, fibroid tumors, etc.

3.9 How does cervical cancer differ from other cancers, such as those of the leg, eye or breast?

A. Unlike other cancers, cancer of the cervix is preventable and can be detected before it is too late. By regular screening, women can find out if they have abnormal cells on the cervix which can lead to cancer. Another difference is that cervical cancer is only found in women.

3.10 What happens when you smoke and what makes it a risk factor for cervical cancer?

A. There are harmful chemicals contained in cigarette smoke that can weaken the immune system of the cervix. These abnormal changes can eventually lead to cervical cancer.

3.11 Can you transmit cancer to your baby during the birthing process?

A. No. Cervical cancer is a non-communicable condition.

3.12 How can I know if the pre-cancer has developed into real cancer?

You have to be seen by a health professional to know this.

3.13 Who is eligible for cervical cancer screening?

A. Any woman who has ever had sexual intercourse is at risk of having cervical cancer.

3.14 Should a woman who has attained menopause be screened for cervical cancer?

A. Yes. Any woman who is or has been sexually active should be screened for cervical cancer.

3.15 Why has cervical cancer only become prevalent now? Could it be due to promiscuity?

A. Cervical cancer is not a new disease although HIV has caused it to increase. Previously when women had no access to antiretroviral treatment (ART) and when cervical cancer screening services were not available, many women with HIV died without knowing they had cervical cancer. Now that women have access to ART, they are living long enough to develop cervical cancer.

3.16 Why should I get screened when I am not feeling any pain?

A. Even if you're not feeling any pain, it's possible that you may have a pre-cancer lesion and not know it. The only way of knowing that you have a pre-cancer is by having your cervix screened.

3.17 Can women who have never had children have cancer of the cervix?

A. Yes. As long as a woman has ever had sexual intercourse during her lifetime, it means she has been exposed to HPV and can possibly get cancer of the cervix.

3.18 Which is the most vulnerable age group to cervical cancer?

A. Women in the reproductive age are the most vulnerable because they are more sexually active. However, even women that are past menopause are at risk. That is why every woman who is or has been sexually active, regardless of her age, should get screened.

3.19 What types of foods are advisable to eat when you have cervical cancer?

A. Fruits, vegetables, grains (maize, rice, wheat etc), legumes (beans, peas, soybeans) and fermented products (yoghurt). Eat less fried meat and more boiled or baked meat. Try not to eat red meat because it has very high levels of fat, and so does chicken. It is better to cook with vegetable oils like olive oil rather than using cooking fat. It's also healthier to eat roller meal, brown rice and brown bread because they have more vitamins and minerals.

3.20 Can a TB patient have cervical cancer at the same time?

- A. Yes. Especially if the patient has HIV and has a low CD4 count, her immune system is weak and so she is vulnerable to a lot of infections.

3.21 Do all women have cervical cancer?

- A. No, however, it is the leading cause of cancer deaths among women in Zambia.

3.22 What precautions can women take to avoid cervical cancer?

- A. Use condoms; eat fruits and vegetables; go for regular screening; practice safe sex and healthy hygiene habits.

3.23 Can a woman without a uterus come for screening?

- A. As long as the woman still has a cervix, she should be screened for cervical cancer.

3.24 How does inserting herbs into your vagina put you at risk of cervical cancer?

- A. Herbs can bruise or irritate the lining of the vagina, increasing your risk for acquiring HPV, as well as HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections.

4 Screening

4.1 How often do I need to be screened for cervical cancer?

- A. It's important to be screened at regular time intervals. If your first screening test is negative, it's better for you to check again after 2-3 years to make sure it stays negative. If your initial screening test was positive and you were treated for pre-cancer, your health provider will advise you on when next you should be screened.

4.2 What will happen to my husband after I get screened?

- A. Nothing. You may need to tell him of your decision to get screened and treated. It's important that he supports you throughout your healing process, if you get treated for a precancer lesion.

4.3 Can I be screened or treated while pregnant?

- A. If you're pregnant, you can be screened. To avoid complications during the pregnancy, treatment is usually delayed after you have given birth. If you are found to have invasive cancer, the type of treatment you get will depend on the stage of the pregnancy.

4.4 Can I be screened if I am a virgin?

A. If you are a virgin, it is not necessary for you to get screened because HPV is sexually transmitted. However, a woman can get HPV even if the man only rubs his genital organs on the area around the outside of her vagina.

4.5 Why do you wash the cervix with vinegar?

A. Vinegar is a kind of diluted acid which makes the pre-cancer cells on the cervix turn white. This makes it possible for the doctor or nurse who is screening you to see the pre-cancer cells and treat them.

4.6 Is there any other way I can know if I have cancer or not apart from taking off my underwear and being screened?

A. No. Screening is the only sure way to know if you have cancer or pre-cancer of the cervix.

4.7 Do you draw any blood samples or body fluids when screening for cervical cancer?

A. No, however, what we do is a visual examination of the cervix.

4.8 How long does the screening take and when do you give results?

A. Screening takes between 20-30 minutes and the results are given to you immediately.

4.9 Is the insertion of a speculum in the vagina painful?

A. Normally it is not painful if the patient is relaxed.

4.10 How many women have a positive screening test positive who have no symptoms?

A. There are many women who have no symptoms but test positive. That is why every woman should get screened, whether she has symptoms or not, so that she can be sure of good health.

4.11 Why can't cervical cancer screening be compulsory for every woman who comes into the clinic?

A. It would be nice for all women to get screened for cervical cancer because it is very important. However, women cannot be forced into getting screened. That's why all women should understand the importance of cervical cancer screening so that they can voluntarily have themselves checked.

5 Treatment

5.1 Does Cryotherapy hurt?

- A. Cryotherapy involves freezing precancerous cells in order to kill them. The coldness felt during the procedure may cause mild cramps but the pain is not extreme and only last for a few minutes. The cramps are caused by contractions of the muscles in the womb. The cramps go away after only a few minutes and do not come back.

5.2 What is the name of the gas used for cryotherapy?

- A. Two gases can be used for cryotherapy. These are carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide.

5.3 Why do I have discharge after cryotherapy?

- A. The discharge after cryotherapy contains the dead pre-cancer cells that have been killed off by freezing.

5.4 What can happen if I do not abstain from sex for four (4) weeks after treatment?

- A. You are advised to abstain from sex for a minimum of 4 weeks after treatment to allow proper and complete healing of your cervix. If you do not abstain you risk injuring and infecting your cervix. If this happens you will not heal properly or may experience bleeding and infection.

5.5 In which stage of cancer can your uterus be removed?

- A. When a real (invasive) cancer is found early. Otherwise it has to be treated with radiation.

5.6 What happens during radiotherapy or chemotherapy, and is this a cure for cancer?

- A. Radiotherapy is the approved treatment for advanced cancers which cannot be treated by surgery. Depending on the stage of the cancer, radiotherapy can cure it. Sometime chemotherapy is combined with radiotherapy to make it work better.

5.7 What is LEEP and why do you do it?

- A. LEEP stands for **L**oop **E**lectrosurgical **E**xcision **P**rocedure. It's a procedure during which the healthcare professional removes a pre-cancer from the cervix using a special instrument that uses electricity. LEEP is done when the pre-cancer lesion cannot be treated by cryotherapy.

5.8 What kind of treatment do you give for pre-cancer and cervical cancer?

- A. Pre-cancer lesions are treated using cryotherapy and LEEP. Cancer is treated by chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

6 Clinic level questions

6.1 What do you use to check the cervix, do you use the same instruments (speculums) on every other woman?

- A. We use a sterilized set of instruments, vinegar and cotton wool. Each woman is examined using a different speculum and a different set of instruments which have been sterilized and autoclaved at high temperatures which kill HIV, HPV, other viruses and bacteria.

6.2 Who does the screening, is it a man or a woman?

- A. Both men and women do the screening, but most of our clinics have specially trained female nurses.

6.3 Do you charge for screening and treatment of cervical cancer?

- A. No. It's absolutely free and you don't need to make an appointment.

6.4 What is VIA?

- A. VIA stands for **V**isual **I**nspection with **A**cetic acid. This is a procedure used to check for pre-cancer lesions using vinegar (vinegar is the same as acetic acid). The nurse/doctor puts vinegar on your cervix and if there are cancer-causing lesions they turn white. This is what the nurse/doctor looks for.

6.5 What is a biopsy?

- A. A biopsy is the removal of a piece of the cervix using special instruments for lab examination to determine if there's a problem.

7 HIV and AIDS

7.1 Why is cervical cancer more common and emphasized on women who have HIV than women who don't have HIV?

- A. Cervical cancer is more common in areas where HIV rates are high. HPV is the virus that causes cervical cancer. A woman who is HIV positive is at a higher risk of developing cervical cancer because her immune system is weak and thus HPV grows faster. That is why women with HIV need to pay close attention to their health and should get screened for cervical cancer.

7.2 If I am on TB drugs and antiretroviral drugs, after I get screened and come out VIA positive, could I die?

A. No.

8 Community level issues

8.1 Can taking herbs cure cancer?

A. Many herbs have curative effects but the most effective proven treatment for cancer is an operation and/or radiation therapy when necessary.

8.2 How harmful are herbs that are inserted into the vagina and what do they do to the natural defenses of the vagina?

A. Herbs placed in the vagina may irritate and bruise the lining of the vagina. The small cuts and bruises (called micro-abrasions) make it easier for a woman to acquire or transmit sexually transmitted infections, including HIV and HPV.

8.3 Why don't you just teach women as these topics only concern women?

A. The topic of cervical cancer concerns both women and men since they are both carriers of HPV. Men need to be educated on how to avoid infecting their partners with HPV and also on how else they can participate in cervical cancer prevention.

8.4 Why is this programme only done in town and not in rural areas where most women are ignorant of the HPV?

A. There are also women in the urban areas that are unaware of the link between HPV and cervical cancer, and many in both rural and urban areas who have been affected by it. However, this program has every intention of expanding to the rural areas whenever possible.

8.5 I couldn't get pregnant for a number of years. A month after undergoing cryotherapy, I was able to fall pregnant with no difficulty. What caused this?

A. This is a good outcome but there is currently no evidence of a direct relationship between cryotherapy and pregnancy.

8.6 How many times is one supposed to wash her cervix per day?

A. A woman is never supposed to wash her cervix. The cervix itself produces mucus-like discharge which washes away the germs that are in the cervix and the vagina. What women should do is only wash the outside of the vagina with a mild soap and water when taking a bath (at least once a day).

8.7 Why is douching not allowed?

A. Regular douching is not encouraged because it:

- Kills and/or removes the good bacteria that produce acid in the vagina. The acid helps kill HPV, HIV and other bacteria;
- Removes mucous which kills bacteria and viruses;
- May push bacteria into the woman's tubes and uterus which can cause her to get an infection and eventually make her unable to get pregnant; and
- It can bruise the lining of the vagina making it easier for a woman to get or pass on HIV and other STIs.

8.8 What can I do to refrain from having sex after treatment?

- A. You need to set your health as a priority. Your cervix needs time to heal so avoid putting yourself at risk of re-infection with HPV or even infection with HIV. If you cannot refrain from sex, you should use a condom.

8.9 How do I convince my husband that I should go for cervical cancer screening and possible treatment?

- A. You should explain to your husband that cervical cancer is the leading cause of deaths among Zambian women today, and every sexually active woman is at risk. Since cervical cancer is preventable, he should understand that the only way for you to be safe is if you get screened and treated for the disease and that men should be faithful to their partners.

9 Myths and misconceptions

9.1 I heard that when a man is circumcised he can't get the HIV/HPV. How true is this?

- A. Both circumcised and uncircumcised men may get infected with HIV and/or HPV. However, when a man is circumcised, the risk of him acquiring HPV, as well as HIV, is reduced. This is because the skin that is removed during circumcision is the area where these viruses get attached during infection. However, it **does not** mean he can never get the virus. It just means the risk of him getting the virus is reduced.

9.2 I have heard that taking yoghurt and sour milk can clean your vagina or cervix, how true is this?

- A. Yoghurt and sour milk DO NOT clean the vagina or cervix. They contain healthy bacteria found normally in the vagina. These good bacteria protect the vagina from infections by producing acid. Yoghurt and sour milk can be eaten and/or drunk to help maintain the acid conditions of the vagina but should not be put

inside the vagina to clean it. The vagina is cleaned by the mucus produced by the cervix.

9.3 Does cancer of the cervix cause infertility?

- A. Depending on the stage of the cancer, your uterus may have to be removed by surgery or treated with radiation, making it impossible for you to have children.

9.4 Does cryotherapy cause tuberculosis or pneumonia?

- A. NO. The purpose of cryotherapy is to kill the pre-cancer cells. It CANNOT cause TB or pneumonia.

9.5 Is this programme only meant for sick people?

- A. No. This program is meant for all women. Its purpose is to determine if the cervix is healthy and to detect early signs of cancer so as to prevent the disease from developing.

9.6 We heard that there might be an element of Satanism in any free program, is this true?

- A. No. Most free programs aim at helping the less privileged access services they cannot afford. Our program has nothing to do with Satanism.

9.7 Does eating fruits and vegetables help HPV disappear. If yes, how?

- A. Being healthy and having a strong immune system can help the body get rid of HPV. Eating fruits and vegetables helps build a strong immune system, which can then get rid of HPV. However, one needs to do more than just eat fruits and vegetables for a healthy immune system. One should also:

- Exercise for at least one hour everyday
- Drink plenty of clean water every day (about 6-8 glasses)
- Eat less fried food and more boiled, grilled and baked food
- Do not smoke
- Cut back on alcohol



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