

# Questions Frequently Asked of Peer Educators

# Pelvic Anatomy

Are the cervix and the womb the same?

The womb is the same as the uterus. The cervix is part of the uterus (womb). The cervix is the 'door' to the uterus (womb)

# Cervical Cancer and HPV Infection

# What is a cancer?

A cancer is an abnormal growth caused by the uncontrolled growth of cells in the body.

Not all growths are cancer.

Those that can spread to other parts of the body and can interfere with normal functions of the body are called cancer.

For example, fibroids are not cancer.

# What are the signs and symptoms of cervical cancer?

- Bleeding in between periods
- Bleeding after sex
- A foul smelling discharge from the vagina
- Lower abdominal pain
- Post-menopausal bleeding
- Severe backache
- Weight loss
- Infections that do not go away even after treatment

# Why doesn't cervical cancer have symptoms in its early stages?

Cervical precancer has no symptoms but cancers often cause bleeding or continuous discharge.

Therefore the best time to go in for screening is when you are feeling fine and are not having any symptoms.

I have a bloody vaginal discharge  
after sexual intercourse –  
what could it be?

It could be related to a sexually transmitted infection, damage to your vagina that occurred during sex, or a cancer.

It is definitely something you should have checked by a health professional. Do not wait until it gets serious.



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

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 precancer or cancer, it is found before it has spread too far.

# Is invasive cervical cancer curable?

Cervical cancer is curable depending on the stage at which it is.

Invasive cancer is usually treated by chemotherapy and radiation therapy.

Advanced disease may not be able to be cured.

# Is cervical cancer a new disease?

No. Previously, cervical cancer screening services were not available, and so cervical cancer was not heard of and women died without a correct diagnosis.

Now that free screening is being offered, women can get treated before pre-cancer turns into a real cancer.

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

There is a possibility that you might  
develop cancer but it is rare.

# What is the cause of cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is caused by a sexually transmitted virus known as the Human Papillomavirus or HPV.

# What is HPV?

This is the virus that causes warts or growths on different parts of the body.

There are certain types of HPV that can cause growths around the anus of a man or woman, the penis of a man, the vagina or cervix of a woman.

In a woman, HPV infection of the cervix can lead to cancer.

# What does the cervix contain that attracts HPV?

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.

# Is HPV related to STIs?

HPV is a sexually transmitted virus.

The risk of acquiring an HPV infection is increased with the presence of other STIs because the body's defenses are weakened.



# Is there a vaccine for HPV?

Yes, although it is not yet available to many women.

How can a young woman 18 years old be found with invasive cancer when it usually takes 10-20 years after initial infection with HPV?

If this young woman started having unprotected sex at a very young age, has had multiple sexual partners and especially if she is also HIV positive, it's possible for her to have cervical cancer at an early age.

# What precautions can women take to avoid cervical cancer?

- Go for regular screening
- Use condoms
- Practice safe and healthy hygiene methods
- Eat fruits and vegetables

I have had sex once, can I have  
HPV?

Yes. Your partner may have HPV and may transmit it to you during a single sexual encounter.

How can I have cervical cancer if I am only seeing one man?

Your sexual partner may have had other partners in the past or may have more than one partner currently.

So even though you only have one sexual partner, you are still at risk for HPV infection and cervical cancer.

# Does HPV only infect men?

No. Both men and women may be infected with HPV.

The only difference is that HPV infection in women can eventually lead to cervical cancer.

# How would a man know whether he has an HPV infection?

Currently there's no test designed to screen for HPV in men. So a man may not know that he has HPV.

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

A condom is not 100% safe, but it does offer some protection against HPV.

Condoms prevent other sexually transmitted infections like syphilis and HIV.

Condoms may also be used as contraception, to prevent pregnancy.



Instead of treating the women, why can't you treat men for HPV?

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 early HPV infection in men or women.

# Can circumcised men become infected with HPV?

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.

# How can we help men control HPV?

All men should be encouraged to have only one sexual partner and to use condoms.

Male circumcision also reduces the risk of HPV infection.

# Is smoking a risk factor for HPV infection?

Harmful chemicals contained in cigarette smoke cause abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. These abnormal changes can eventually lead to cervical cancer.

The progression to cancer is faster in women who smoke and have persistent HPV infection.

# Cervical Cancer and HIV

# Is there any relation between cervical cancer and HIV?

Cervical cancer is more prevalent in areas where HIV rates are high. Cervical cancer is not HIV related but women with HIV are more likely to develop cervical cancer than those without HIV. This is because women with HIV have got weakened immune systems and they are vulnerable to other infections.

Can an HIV negative woman have cancer of the cervix?

Yes. Any woman who has had sexual intercourse, regardless of age, race or HIV status, is at risk of having cervical cancer.

# Do you also do VCT?

We offer diagnostic counseling and testing (DCT), which is a test for HIV.



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

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

# Myths About Cervical Cancer and HPV

# Why has cervical cancer only become prevalent now?

Cervical cancer has always been there, and it appears to be more prevalent in areas with high HIV prevalence. Previously when there was no antiretroviral treatment and when cervical cancer screening services were not available, so many women were dying without knowing what was wrong with them.

If all women can get screened, cervical cancer rates should reduce over time.

# Do all women have cervical cancer?

NO. Only the women who have persistent HPV infection which is left untreated. This is why every woman should be screened in order to prevent cervical cancer from developing.

# Do family planning methods cause cancer?

If there is a risk it is minimal so there is no reason for women to stop using contraceptives as the benefits outweigh the risks.

# How does inserting herbs into your vagina put you at risk for cervical cancer?

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

# Can the intake of fresh fruits and vegetables flush away HPV?

Fresh fruits and vegetables cannot flush away the virus but they help build immunity to many infections, including HPV. They should therefore be eaten on a regular basis to prevent initial infection.

# Do yoghurt and sour milk clean the vagina or cervix?

Yoghurt and sour milk DO NOT clean the vagina or cervix. They just contain the same good and harmless bacteria found normally in the vagina

Yoghurt and sour milk can be eaten/drunk to help maintain the acid conditions of the vagina but not to clean it. The vagina is cleaned by the mucus produced by the cervix.



# Are fibroids caused by HPV?

No. Fibroids are non-cancerous growths that develop in the female reproductive tract. The exact cause of fibroids is still unknown.

# Cervical Cancer Screening

# How does cervical cancer differ from other cancers?

Unlike other cancers, cancer of the cervix is preventable.

By regular screening, women can find out if they have abnormal cells on the cervix which can lead to cancer.

# Who is eligible for cervical cancer screening?

Any woman who has had sexual intercourse.

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

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.

# How often do I need to be screened?

It's important to be screened at regular intervals. If your first screening test is negative you should be re-screened after a year.

If your first screening test was positive and you were treated for precancer, your health provider will advise on when next you should be screened.

Can a woman without a uterus  
come for screening?

Yes. As long as the woman still has a  
cervix, she can be screened for cervical  
cancer.

How long does the screening take and when are the results available?

Screening takes between 10-20 minutes and the results are given to you immediately.



How many women without any signs or symptoms have an abnormal screening test?

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

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

Both men and women do the screening, but most of our clinics are staffed by trained female nurses.

Do you charge for screening and treatment?

No. It's absolutely free and you do not need to make an appointment.

What do you use for cervical cancer screening?

A sterilized set of instruments, vinegar and cotton wool.

Do you use the same instruments  
for every exam?

No. Each woman is examined using a  
different speculum and a different set of  
instruments which have been sterilized at  
high temperatures.

# What is VIA?

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 looks at it for any cancer-causing lesions.

# Why do you wash the cervix with vinegar?

Vinegar is a dilute acid which makes the precancer cells on the cervix turn white. This makes it possible for the doctor or nurse who is screening you to see the precancer cells and treat them if needed.

# What is a biopsy?

A biopsy is the removal of a piece of the cervix for lab examination to determine if there is a problem.



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

No

# How can one know if the pre-cancer has developed into real cancer?

The signs and symptoms of real cancer will present themselves.

The purpose of cervical cancer screening is to avoid the development of pre-cancer to real cancer by catching and treating the cancer early.

Apart from screening, is there any other way to know if I have cancer?

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

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

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

If I have HIV and TB, as well as cervical pre-cancer could I die?

Having a VIA positive test will allow you to get treated for possible cervical cancer. Being on ART and TB drugs should only help you heal faster, it will not kill you.

# Can I be screened if I am a virgin?

If you are a virgin, it is not necessary for you to get screened as 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.

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

You should explain to your husband that cervical cancer is the leading cause of deaths among Zambian women today, and that 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.

What will happen to my husband  
after I get screened?

Nothing. You may want to inform your decision to get screened and treated. It's important that he supports you throughout your healing process.



# Cervical Cancer Treatment

What kind of treatment is available for pre-cancer and cervical cancer?

Pre-cancer lesions are treated using cryotherapy and LEEP.

Cancer is treated by surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy.

# Does treatment hurt?

Cryotherapy involves freezing the precancerous cells in order to kill them. The coldness experienced during the procedure may cause you to have mild cramps for a few minutes. The cramps go away after the cryotherapy is done and they do not come back.

What is the name of the gas used for cryotherapy?

2 gases can be used for cryotherapy. These are carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide.

# Why do I have discharge after cryotherapy?

The discharge after cryotherapy contains the dead precancer cells that have been killed off by freezing.

Does cryotherapy cause TB or pneumonia?

NO. The purpose of cryotherapy is to kill the precancer cells. It CANNOT cause TB or pneumonia.

# What is LEEP and why do you do it?

LEEP stands for **L**oop **E**lectrosurgical **E**xcision **P**rocedure.

It's a procedure where the doctor 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.

# What happens during radiotherapy or chemotherapy? Is this the cure for cancer?

- 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.



# Post-treatment Recommendations

# What will happen if I do not abstain from sex for 4 weeks after treatment?

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 re-infecting your cervix, then you will not heal properly or may experience bleeding and infection.

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

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.

# Pregnancy Following Screening and Treatment for Cervical Cancer

# Can I ever have a baby if I am treated for pre- cancer or cancer?

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 can have a baby.

If you have been treated for real cancer, usually you won't be able to have a baby because some treatment requires that the cervix and the womb are removed.

# Can I be screened or treated while pregnant?

If you're pregnant, you can be screened. To avoid complications during the pregnancy, treatment is done after you have given birth.

If you are found to have invasive cancer, treatment given will depend on the stage of the pregnancy.

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

No.

# Does cancer of the cervix cause infertility?

Depending on the stage of the cancer, your uterus may have to be removed by surgery, making it impossible for you to have children.



Miscellaneous

# What causes warts?

Genital warts are caused by the kind of HPV known as low-risk types of HPV. This kind of HPV is not the same as the types that cause cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is caused by high-risk types of HPV.

# What treatment is there for warts and are they curable?

Warts can be treated using medicine, surgical removal or they can be frozen off. They usually recur, so they need to be treated each time they re-appear.

Why is this programm only in town and not in rural areas?

This program is new and still growing.

We have every intention of expanding to the rural areas when possible.

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

No. Most free programs aim at helping the less privileged access services they cannot afford.

Our program has nothing to do with Satanism.

# Are women supposed to wash their cervix?

A woman is not supposed to wash her cervix at all. The cervix itself produces mucus-like discharge which washes away the germs that are in the cervix and the vagina.

Women should wash the outside of the vagina with a mild soap and water when taking a bath.

Is it normal for a woman to have a period more than once a month?

Ordinarily, a woman should have her period every 28 days, or roughly once a month.

More frequent menstrual bleeding may should be evaluated by a doctor.

# What causes prostate cancer?

Prostate cancer happens when cells of the prostate gland, found in men only, undergo rapid changes and start dividing out of control.

Causal factors for prostate cancer include diet and family history of the disease.



“Every woman has the right to live  
a life free from cervical cancer”

