



CANCER ALLIANCE

POLICY 3 – CERVICAL CANCER

PART 1 – THE NEW POLICY

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS: FROM AGE 30, YOU ARE ENTITLED TO THREE FREE SCREENINGS AT 10-YEAR INTERVALS. BUT IF ANY ABNORMALITY IS DETECTED, YOU MUST UNDERGO SCREENING EVERY THREE YEARS. FOR HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN, SCREENING IS EVERY THREE YEARS, OR ANNUALLY IF YOU TEST POSITIVE FOR DISEASE.

Cervical cancer has been identified as a national priority in South Africa [where it is] the second most common cancer among women. Due to limited access to prevention, early diagnosis and treatment, [it] is often fatal. – Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, SA Minister of Health¹

South Africa's new Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control Policy is a critical document that effectively updates the country's existing broad-based programme to address this preventable cancer. It takes account of technological advancements in the prevention arena, along with new evidence on screening, particularly in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The policy rests on three interdependent strategies, which include:

- Reducing HPV infections (the most common cause of cervical cancer).
- Early detection and treatment of cervical pre-cancer.
- Timely treatment and palliative care for invasive cancer.

Why is South Africa's new Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control Policy so important?

With nearly 13 000 new cervical cancer cases diagnosed every year in South Africa, this cancer is the second leading cause of all female cancers countrywide. It is also the most common female cancer in women aged 15 to 44, resulting in an estimated 3 000 deaths every year.²

Organised cervical cancer screening for eligible women is already central to the national Health Department's cervical cancer prevention strategy, but the statistics highlight the urgent need for an updated approach that takes advantage of new technologies and methods.

Most importantly, cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers. It is also slow-growing so if it is diagnosed and treated early, it IS a curable disease.³



What causes cervical cancer?

Nearly all cases are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), the most common viral infection of the reproductive tract, which infects most sexually-active women and men at some point in their lives.

Two HPV types – 16 and 18 – cause 70% of cervical cancers and precancerous cervical lesions.

Are you at risk?

You are at higher risk if:

- You are HIV-positive or have any other condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off illness.
- You have had multiple sexual partners, have sex with partners who themselves have multiple sexual partners, or participate in high-risk sexual activity.
- You have not been vaccinated against HPV.
- You already have a sexually-transmitted infection.
- You smoke. The risk increases according to how much you smoke, and how young you were when you started smoking.⁴
- You use oral contraceptives.

What are the symptoms?

For women who regularly undergo Pap screening, the first sign of this disease is usually an abnormal Pap test result.⁵

Early symptoms that may occur can include:

- Abnormal vaginal bleeding between periods, after intercourse, or after menopause.
- Continuous vaginal discharge (pale, watery, pink, brown, bloody or foul-smelling).
- Heavier periods that continue for longer than usual.

Signs and symptoms of progress cervical cancer include:

- Vaginal bleeding after sex.
- Pelvic pain or pain during sex.
- Offensive vaginal discharge.
- Abnormal bleeding between menstrual periods, heavier period, or bleeding after menopause.
- Increased or painful urination, or urinary infection.
- Lower back or leg pain, or a single swollen leg.
- Bone fractures.
- Unexplained weight loss.

What does the new policy mean for you?

The three-pronged assault on cervical cancer is aimed at doing the following:

- Reducing HPV infections that cause tumours or promote formation of tumours. This includes primary prevention of cervical cancer via free HPV vaccinations for girls aged nine to 12, free cervical cancer screenings every 10 years, and a focus on prevention efforts to encourage safer sex practices.
- Detecting and treating cervical pre-cancer. Pre-cancerous conditions of the cervix are changes to cervical cells that make them more likely to develop into cancer. Positive

screening tests that go untreated raise the risk of the affected women developing cancer within the next five- to 30-year period.

- Ensuring timely treatment and palliative care for invasive cervical cancer to address the high levels of illness and death associated with the disease, which currently has a devastating impact on South African communities.

Each of these three components will be addressed in more detail in the next three publications unpacking the new Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control Policy.

What if you are HIV-positive?

Women who are HIV-positive – whether or not you are on antiretroviral (ARV) treatment – are at increased risk of contracting HPV, and for the development of visible cervical cancer.⁶

Women infected with HIV have:

- Higher incidence of HPV.
- Higher prevalence of HPV.
- Higher HPV viral loads.
- Are at increased risk of persistent infection with HPV.

One of the strategic objectives of the new policy is to reduce the incidence (new cases) of tumour-causing HPV infection in HIV-positive women – from 60% (2017) to 50% (2022).

Some of the steps detailed in the policy to achieve this result include:

- All HIV-positive women must be screened for cervical cancer at diagnosis.
- They must undergo subsequent annual screening if the test is positive for HPV, or every three years if the result is negative.

Is the new policy already in effect?

The revised policy brief was published in June 2017 and officially launched in August 2017.

References:

1. National Department of Health (2017). Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control Policy. P4
2. HPV Information Centre (2019). Human Papillomavirus and Related Diseases Report. P6–11
3. WebMD (2005–2018). What is Cervical Cancer. Retrieved on 25 January, 2019, from <https://www.webmd.com/cancer/cervical-cancer/what-is-cervical-cancer#1>
4. Cancer Research UK. Cervical Cancer, Risks and Causes. Retrieved on 25 January, 2019, from <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cervical-cancer/risks-causes>
5. CANSA (2018). Fact Sheet and Position Statement on Cervical Cancer. Retrieved on 25 January, 2019, from <https://www.cansa.org.za/files/2018/10/Fact-Sheet-Position-Statement-Cervical-Cancer-October-2018.pdf>
6. CANSA (2018). Fact Sheet and Position Statement on Cervical Cancer. Retrieved on 29 January, 2019, from <https://www.cansa.org.za/files/2018/10/Fact-Sheet-Position-Statement-Cervical-Cancer-October-2018.pdf>

Social media

South Africa's #CervicalCancer #Policy provides free HPV vaccinations for girls aged 9 – 12. #KnowYourRights #LetsTalkAboutCancer

South Africa's #CervicalCancer #Policy provides for timely treatment and palliative care. #KnowYourRights #LetsTalkAboutCancer

If you are under 30 but have a high risk for #CervicalCancer, then you are entitled to free screenings annually for three years if you test positive. #KnowYourRights #LetsTalkAboutCancer

If you are over 30, South Africa's #CervicalCancer #Policy gives you the right to three free cancer screenings at 10 year intervals #KnowYourRights #LetsTalkAboutCancer

If you are HIV Positive, or if an abnormality was detected, you need to be screened for #CervicalCancer every three years #LetsTalkAboutCancer

South Africa's #CervicalCancer policy includes three strategies:

- Reducing HPV infections (the most common cause of cervical cancer).
- Early detection and treatment of cervical pre-cancer.
- Timely treatment and palliative care for invasive cancer.

#CervicalCancer is the second leading cause of cancer in South Africa's women. Nearly 13 000 new cases are diagnosed every year. In SA, 3000 women aged 15 to 44 die from cervical cancer each year.

Find all the memes: <https://bit.ly/Cervical1>