



WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cervical cancer develops when cells in the cervix begin to grow out of control and can then invade nearby tissues or spread throughout the body. Cervical cancer usually develops very slowly and begins with a condition called Dysplasia. This pre-cancerous condition can be detected by a Pap Smear and is completely treatable. It can take years for pre-cancerous changes to turn in to Cervical cancer. Most women who are diagnosed with Cervical cancer today have not had regular Pap smears or they have not followed up on abnormal Pap smear results. Almost all Cervical cancers are caused by HPV (human papilloma virus). HPV is a common virus that is spread through sexual intercourse. There are many different types of HPV. Some strains lead to Cervical cancer. Other strains may cause genital warts, while others do not cause any problems at all. A woman's sexual habits and patterns can increase her risk for Cervical cancer. Risky sexual practices include having sex at an early age, or partners who participate in high-risk sexual activities.

STATISTICS

Worldwide, Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women and the third leading cause of deaths. In 2008 itself 530,000 new cases were diagnosed and 275,000 deaths were recorded. Without urgent action, deaths are projected to rise by 25% over the next 10 years. Cervical cancer is the 2nd leading cancer and 7th cause of deaths for females in UAE. Most of the cases of Cervical cancer in UAE are not detected until they are in the late stages, when it is difficult to treat.

SYMPTOMS

There are no visible symptoms of early infection with HPV types 16 and 18 – the types that cause Cervical cancer. As Cervical cancer progresses into more advanced stages, symptoms begin to appear. Cervical cancer symptoms include:

- **Pelvic pain:** Persistent pelvic pain unrelated to other conditions, menstruation, or physical exertion can be a symptom of cervical cancer.
- **Continuous vaginal discharge:** Discharge may be pale, watery, pink, brown, bloody or foul-smelling.
- **Pain during sexual intercourse:** Some women with Cervical cancer may experience pain during vaginal intercourse.
- **Abnormal vaginal bleeding:** Abnormal vaginal bleeding is the most commonly experienced Cervical cancer symptom. Women should be aware of post-coital bleeding (bleeding after sex), bleeding after douching, heavy periods, heavy spotting between periods, or an additional period during the monthly cycle. Any heavy, sudden onset of abnormal vaginal bleeding should be reported to your physician immediately.

CERVICAL CANCER RISK FACTORS

Almost all Cervical cancers are caused by human papillomavirus (HPV), a common virus that can be passed from one person to another during sex. There are many types of HPV. In addition to HPV, other things can increase your risk of Cervical cancer. They include:

- Smoking.
- Having HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) or another condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems.

- Using birth control pills for a long time (five or more years).
- Having given birth to three or more children.

PREVENTION

There is a vaccine that prevents females from infection with HPV, 2 types of vaccines are available in the market and both are approved by UAE Ministry of Health and the Health Authority of Abu Dhabi.

The two vaccines (Cervarix and Gardasil) are available to protect females against the types of HPV that cause most Cervical cancers. One of these vaccines (Gardasil) also protects against most genital warts. The Health Authority Abu Dhabi has approved the HPV vaccine for girls and young women, 15 to 26 years of age, for the prevention of Cervical cancer and its precursors. Studies have shown that immunogenicity of the vaccines is higher when administered at a younger age, therefore each girl is encouraged to take the vaccine as early as possible during the adolescence stage or at least some years before marriage. It is also recommended to get the same vaccine brand for all three doses, whenever possible.

The HPV vaccine has been shown to be safe in large clinical trials. Minor side effects such as redness, pain, swelling at the injection site and mild fever might occur. HPV vaccine will not treat or cure the type of HPV a woman already has, but it will protect her against the other types of HPV. Women should continue to have regular Pap tests after vaccination. Remember that HPV vaccine does not protect against all HPV types that cause Cervical cancer.

For Health Awareness programmes please contact: reach@zulekha-hospitals.com

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