

Early Pap Smear can save you from cervical cancer

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According to World Health Organisation, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women living in less developed regions. In 2012, approximately 270,000 women died from cervical cancer with more than 85 per cent of these deaths occurring in low and middle-income countries. And it is for this reason that

sexually active women must ensure that they undergo a Pap Smear test from time to time.

The test involves using a spatula to scrape cells from the cervix and then carrying out a laboratory examination to test whether they are normal or abnormal.

Meanwhile, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination is recommended for girls from the age of 12 to 18, as the vaccine works best before the girls become

sexually active. Achan, 30, started experiencing on and off pain around her abdomen which was followed by irregular menstrual periods. She sought medical attention and was advised to see a gynecologist.

The gynecologist recommended a Pap smear test but because the examination involved examining her private parts she was a bit embarrassed.

"I felt something metallic (speculum) being inserted inside my vagina. I sud-

denly became uncomfortable and pain around my vagina," she says.

Achan was taking the test for the first time. This was in 2012.

"With my vaginal walls widened, the doctor got a cotton swab and carefully scraped some cells from my cervix. Once this procedure was done, the gynecologist informed me that the cells would be analysed in a laboratory,"

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HAVE YOU DONE A PAP SMEAR TEST BEFORE?



"I have never done a Pap Smear test. I keep postponing the appointments. But one day, I will get time and go and do the examination from Mulago hospital."
 AYISHAR NAGUDI



"I always fail to get time to go and do a Pap Smear. But now that you have mentioned it, I will ensure that I undergo the examination one day."
 CLIVIA NANFUKA

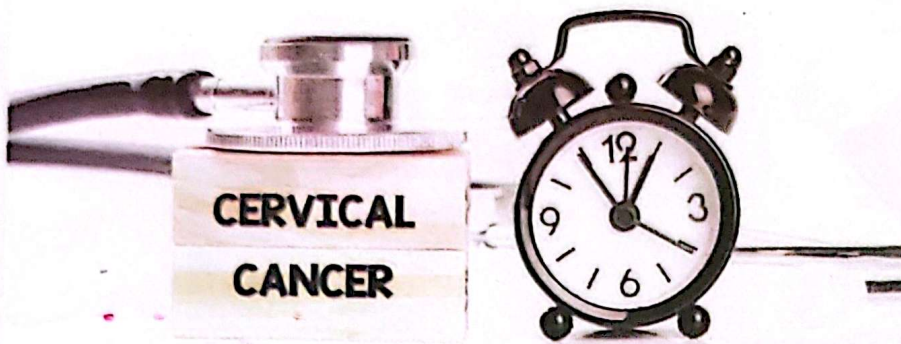


"I did a Pap Smear test about two years ago. The results came back negative."
 DOREEN NASASIRA

Early Pap Smear can save you from cervical cancer

The World Health Organisation (WHO) points out cervical cancer as the second most common cancer in women living in less developed regions. In 2012, approximately 270,000 women died from cervical cancer.

...FROM COVER



Always make sure you go for a checkup because cancer is treatable if detected early enough. NET PHOTO

A few hours later, Achan was told that she had cervical cancer in its early stage.

This meant it was only on the surface of the cervix and had not spread to other tissues.

"I moved out of the gynecologist's office to the women's toilets and cried for almost one hour. I only kept thinking of death," she says.

She later shared her agony with her boyfriend, who managed to console her out of the scare.

"I went and did a second pap smear from another hospital and the results were confirmed," she says.

From the hospital, Achan went to Mulago Cancer Institute and she was put on treatment.

"I lost my hair. My body darkened and I became weaker," she says.

The treatment went on for about a year where she spent about Shs2m, much of which was from personal savings.

"I used much of the money to buy drugs," the trained teacher says before adding, she was declared cancer free in 2013.

All through this dilemma, Achan was supported by family and friends, many of whom encourage her through the fight.

And since then Achan has had a new life advising all women always test so that they can be treated early enough and remain healthy when they test positive.

Missing periods and back pains in Nantongo took a Pap after she started missing

her periods for almost six months in 2014. This was unusual in addition to the excruciating back pain that she was experiencing.

Not sure of what was happening, Nantongo visited a gynecologist who performed a Pap Smear test and discovered she had stage two of cervical cancer.

The cancer, the doctor, said, had been confined within the vagina and had not spread to the lymph nodes.

"I ran out of the clinic crying after the results were confirmed. I was scared but gained after some encouragement from my husband," she says. A few months later, she returned to the gynecologist, who advised that she starts treatment.

"The treatment left me with serious side effects. I used to vomit most of the time and most of my hair fell off," she says.

Nantongo received treatment from the Cancer Institute, free of charge and was declared cancer free in 2016, after almost one year of treatment.

Nantongo, just like Achan, were able to heal because the cancer was discovered early which every woman needs to appreciate even when un-

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 WOMEN BETWEEN 12 AND 18 YEARS MUST MAKE SURE THEY ARE VACCINATED BEFORE THEY BECOME SEXUALLY ACTIVE

usual pain have.

A gynecologist's say

According to Dr Joseph Nsenga, a gynecologist at Bethany Women's Hospital, Luzira, and the cancer is caused by Human Papillomavirus (HPV), spread through sex.

"There is an HPV vaccine that young girls usually of ages 12 to 18 years are required to receive before they become sexually active," Nsenga says, adding, "Sexually active women on the other hand are required to go for cancer screenings from time to time."

Although HPV is easily contracted

by women, the men can get infected as well through intimacy. In men, HPV is responsible for genital warts as well as penile related cases of cancer.

The signs and symptoms

Among women, Nsenga says, the common signs and symptoms of cervical cancer among women include abnormal vaginal discharge, irregular periods and pain during sex and bleeding during or after sex.

On the other hand, men often develop genital warts around the anal or penile region.

Such signs, according to Nsenga, should be the first point that should inform you of the need to seek medical attention.

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FACTS AND MYTHS ABOUT HPV AND THE VACCINE

Myth: HPV only affects females

Fact: Both men and women can get HPV. It is very common, four out five people have HPV at some point in their lives. Although cervical cancer is the most type of cancer caused by HPV, persistent infection is also known to cause penile and anal cancers affecting men. The HPV vaccine protects against 70 per cent of cervical cancers, however, it also provides protection against most of the genital cancers in men caused by HPV infection. Additionally, the vaccine protects against 90 percent of genital warts in both men and women.

Myth: The vaccine was not properly tested and has not been proven to prevent HPV-related cancers.

Fact: In initial clinical trials, the vaccine was given to 20,000 women aged 16 to 26 years in 33 countries including Australia, before it was approved for a widespread use. Further clinical trials involving more than 4,000 males aged 10 to 26 years from 18 countries showed the vaccine was 90 percent effective in preventing genital warts and abnormalities associated with penile cancer, and 78 per cent effective in preventing anal disease, caused by HPV types 6, 11, 16 and 18.

Myth: I am not sexually active yet, so, I do not need the vaccine.

Fact: You may not be thinking about being sexually active yet, however, the vaccine works best if it is given before exposure to HPV, that is, before sexual activity commences.

Myth: Only people who have multiple sexual partners get HPV.

Fact: You can be infected with HPV from one sexual partner, the first time you are sexually active.

Myth: Having the vaccine at a young age leads to promiscuity.

Fact: There is no evidence that boys and girls who receive the vaccine have sex earlier than those who do not have the vaccine, and nor do they have more sexual partners once they became sexually active.

Source: The HPV vaccine, myths and facts: www.hpvvaccine.org.au/contact.aspx