

For immediate release

Press Release

Every woman is at risk for Cervical Cancer

*Cervical Cancer is preventable & treatable and is the the first cancer declared for elimination by
World Health Organization*

New Delhi, November 17, 2020: For the first time ever, on November 17, 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) committed to eliminate a cancer: **cervical cancer**. Caused by infection with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), cervical cancer ranks as the **second most frequent cancer** among women in India. Despite being preventable, it is a serious issue in India, where 96,922 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer every year and 60% of them die of the disease.

As a companion event to the WHO, a webinar was organized by the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health - India Research Center, Project SANCHAR, American Cancer Society and the Cancer Foundation of India by bringing together global and Indian experts to discuss the control of cervical cancer in the Indian context. The webinar was moderated by Dr. Rati Godrej, M.D. - Internal Medicine and Advisor, Harvard School of Public Health - India Research Center.

Every woman is at risk for cervical cancer

Dr. Neerja Bhatla, Unit Head, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at AIIMS, New Delhi and Member of the WHO Director General's Technical Advisory Group on Cervical Cancer Elimination stated that cervical cancer is likely to affect 80% of women at some point of their lives. Mentioning that genetics is not a major causal factor, she stated that women with high number of pregnancies, girls who start sexual activity early, those whose partners have had multiple partners, and women with other infections that increase inflammation (such as gonorrhoea) are at high risk to cervical cancer. Talking about reliability of available tests, Dr. Rengaswamy Sankaranarayanan, Senior visiting scientist, International Agency for Research on Cancer (WHO), mentioned that the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) test is the most accurate and cost effective cervical cancer screening test available thus far. Professor Maqsood Siddiqi, Founder Chairman, Cancer Foundation of India stated that despite cervical cancer being preventable and treatable, the lack of knowledge about cervical cancer in both urban as well as rural areas is a major barrier to women accessing cervical cancer screening, vaccination and treatment.

Possibility of an Indian Cervical Cancer Vaccine by end of 2021

Speaking about the possibility of an Indian vaccine, Dr. Sankaranarayanan mentioned that a promising low-cost and highly efficacious Indian cervical cancer vaccine candidate is in the process of being launched by the end of 2021. The safety profile of the Indian vaccine candidate is excellent as no deaths or serious anaphylactic reactions have been attributed to the vaccine so far.

Dr. Bakul Parekh, President, Indian Academy of Pediatrics highlighted that despite the cervical cancer vaccine being included in the IAP schedule and recommended by IAP for inclusion in India's national immunization programme, it is yet to be included in the national programme. He reiterated that vaccines are a critical measure for cervical cancer prevention and that India should act fast.

Dr. Soumya Swaminathan, Chief Scientist, WHO and Dr. Princess Nothemba (Nono) Simelela, Assistant Director-General for Family, Women, Children and Adolescents, WHO, through a video message stated that the world already has the necessary tools to eliminate cervical cancer - they just need to be made accessible. The WHO aims to achieve the '90-70-90' targets of 90% girls vaccinated by the time they are 15 years old; 70% women screened using a high performance test by 35 years of age and again at 45 years of age; and 90% of women with pre-cancer or cancer to receive appropriate care and treatment by 2030. As per the WHO, cervical cancer incidence rates can fall by ~70% by 2050 if the 90-70-90 target is followed.

Impact of COVID-19 on cervical cancer screening

Dr. Sankaranarayanan stated that self collection of samples seems plausible to potentially increase participation of women in cervical cancer screening programs as both hospital and community based screening programs have been affected owing to COVID-19.

The panelists concluded that the inclusion of the cervical cancer vaccine in the national immunization program is crucial to achieving elimination targets in India and brought to light the need for better infrastructure regarding accessing radiotherapy, screening and treatment.

For any queries, please contact the undersigned:

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*On November 17, 2020 at 7 pm IST, the World Health Organization launched the Global Launch of the Strategy to Accelerate Elimination of Cervical Cancer. During the webinar, Ms. Sangeeta Gupta, a cervical cancer survivor and advocate, shared the below mentioned **link** to this launch of the global strategy:*

<https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2020/11/17/default-calendar/launch-of-the-global-strategy-to-accelerate-the-elimination-of-cervical-cancer>

Link to webinar's YouTube recording: <https://youtu.be/WFOEliWOJs>