



WEST AFRICAN INSTITUTE  
OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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AN ARTICLE BY DOOSHIMA DEBORAH AKU

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## **Background**

Cervical cancer is cancer that develops in the cells of the cervix (the entrance of the uterus from the vagina). It is caused by persistent infection with the Human Papillomavirus (HPV)<sup>1</sup>. While some people may have no symptoms or warning signs, others may experience vaginal bleeding between periods, unusually heavier or longer periods, vaginal bleeding after sex, watery vaginal discharge with strong odour or blood, pelvic pain, pain after sex, vaginal bleeding after menopause<sup>2</sup>. Cervical cancer as the fourth most common cancer in women<sup>3</sup>, remains a serious health challenge, especially in developing countries where education and early detection information is limited.

## **Prevention**

Vaccination and regular screening remain the most effective prevention strategy for this cancer<sup>4</sup>, hence the importance of primary health care. Primary health care is the first and closest level of contact for individuals and the community with the health system. Primary health centres are important avenues in the prevention of cervical cancer through education, early detection and the rollout of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine which is effective in preventing cervical cancer. HPV vaccine is a remarkable advancement in fighting cervical cancer.

## **Significance of Primary Health Care**

Health education sessions, outreaches and campaigns can be undertaken in primary health centres. These can be easily leveraged to inform women on HPV risks, practice of safe sex, healthy lifestyle, importance of screening and the benefits of early HPV vaccination. Collaboration with traditional rulers, schools, and associations can effectively promote health initiatives and dispel myths surrounding vaccine intake.

Primary health centres are readily available hubs for the rollout of HPV vaccines, ensuring they are available, affordable and correctly administered. HPV vaccine is most effective when given before one becomes sexually active. In Nigeria, the HPV vaccine is free for girls aged 9-14 years old in Nigeria<sup>5</sup>. This is a plausible initiative as this period marks the beginning of adolescence for girls and is the best time to take the HPV vaccine. Making

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<sup>1</sup> [WHO: "Health Topics: Cervical Cancer"]

<sup>2</sup> [Mayo Clinic: "Cervical Cancer Symptoms and Causes"]

<sup>3</sup> [WHO, 2024: "Cervical Cancer"]

<sup>4</sup> [WHO: "Enhancing Cervical Cancer Prevention in Nigeria"]

<sup>5</sup> [UNICEF: "Frequently Asked Questions About HPV Vaccine"]

these vaccines available in primary health centres is the most effective means to get them across to the beneficiaries. Adolescent girls can easily be reached for vaccination in underserved areas.

## **Recommendations**

Primary health care systems can be improved by increased funding, enhanced infrastructure, continuous training of healthcare personnel and the utilization of technology for outreach. Partnerships with government agencies, NGOs and individuals is important in improving primary health care, increasing access to HPV vaccination and winning the battle against cervical cancer.

## **Conclusion**

Improving primary healthcare systems is significant in protecting health of both the girl child and women. Awareness on HPV vaccine and access to it is key in preventing cervical cancer. The health of the girl child must be prioritized to ensure a healthy adult life.

Partner with the West African Institute of Public Health to close healthcare gaps. Also, be a part of the **Africa Primary Health Care Forum (APHCF)**, scheduled for **July 24-25, 2025** in **Abuja** as stakeholders across Africa will be gathered to discuss the future of primary health care.