

Needed: More attention to cervical cancer



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When January was observed as cervical cancer awareness month all over the world, more data and statistics about the disease came out nationally as well as globally. The most striking fact that has come to light is that India has one-third of the world's cervical cancer patients. According to a recent survey, cervical cancer is the second among cancers affecting women in the 35-44 age group in India. The national cancer survey results-2023 have revealed that 3.4 lakh women in India have been affected by cervical cancer and that annually 1,23,907 women are hit by this disease and 77,348 women succumb to it. In Tamil Nadu, 8,534 women were afflicted with cervical cancer in 2023, says the union government.

Who're more vulnerable

Cervical cancer is primarily caused in women by infection of the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). The virus spreads through frequent sexual contact. However, not all women are afflicted with this cancer as many have immunity that stalls the cancer. The virus can only be transmitted if the immunity level is low. The women, who fail to maintain vaginal hygiene, marry before the age of 18, have premarital sex, and bisexual women, are more likely to contract cervical cancer. Besides, the disease is likely to afflict those contracting

sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and using contraceptive pills frequently and also for genetic reasons.

Symptoms

In the early stage of cervical cancer, there is only an irregular small inflammation in the cervix, yet showing no symptoms of cancer. It will take a few years for the inflammation to evolve into cancer. So, early detection will make it easy to cure the disease. Hence, we doctors keep insisting women to go for medical check-up at regular intervals for prevention is better than cure.

Generally women with cervical cancer will have their abdomen feeling heavy. Menstruation will be accompanied by painful bleeding. The main symptoms of this disease are pain and bleeding during sex and sudden bleeding in between two cycles of period.

Preventive measures

The HPV vaccine is a boon of modern medicine. The only cancer which has a vaccine is cervical cancer. That is why the World Health Organisation insists on preventing the disease. If girls in the 9-14 age group take two doses of this vaccine staggered over six months, they will certainly have no chance of contracting the cancer. But it is a matter of grave concern that even many educated women are unaware of all this.

Besides, there is the Pap Smear test, one of the early screening tests for cancer. It is available in the Government Hospitals free of cost. The women in the 30-65 age group had better go for this test once in three or five years so that cure will be easier if they are found contracting cervical cancer.

Now there are other tests such as VIA, VILI etc. The tests are beneficial to women in villages too as they are available in Primary Health Centres.

Challenges

The WHO started implementing the Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative in 2020 to eliminate the disease by 2030. Accordingly for each country, the 90/70/90 goal was set. That is to say, 90 per cent of teenage girls must be administered the HPV vaccine; 70 per cent of women must be made to undergo Pap Smear test by the age of 35; and 90 per cent of women must be subjected to an early diagnosis of the disease and cured. In a field survey, in countries including the U.S., Britain, and Sweden, 70 per cent of women have been found to have undergone the test. But unfortunately in India not even one per cent of women have gone for the test for cervical cancer and in Tamil Nadu only seven per cent of women have been tested.

Generally most women do not have proper understanding and awareness of cervical cancer. As they are indifferent to early symptoms of the disease and feel inhibited about talking to others about the symptoms, about 43 per cent of women find themselves afflicted with cervical cancer only when the disease reaches an advanced stage. This poses a challenge to clinical treatment. Since rural women are more fearful and more unwilling than their urban counterparts to go for cervical cancer tests, most of them succumb to an advanced

disease. By the way, the exorbitant price of the HPV vaccine has made it beyond the reach of the common people.

What should be done

A cervical cancer control policy must be drawn up in the country and an awareness campaign launched through the media. Lessons about this cancer must be included in the primary school syllabus. Awareness of this cancer must be spread not only among urban women but also among rural women.

Screening camps must be conducted for women in the 30-45 age group in taluk and government hospitals and primary health centres as well.

Next, the people must be convinced of the authenticity and credibility of the vaccine for cervical cancer. For the video campaigns launched for the purpose, even celebrities can be used.

Meanwhile, it is welcome that the union government recently announced in its interim budget that the girls in the 9-14 age group will be encouraged to be administered the HPV vaccine. This announcement must immediately be translated into action.

The government must ensure that the vaccine is available free of cost to all teenage girls and is administered to them either in schools or PHCs. There is also the HPV vaccine manufactured in India itself, which is cost-effective and must be included in the scheme for the vaccination of women.

Incidentally, it is welcome that the Tamil Nadu government's budget has earmarked funds for the cancer management mission. The funds must be utilized not only for toning up the medical infrastructure but also for providing fundamental services as part of the cancer management mission.

The cancer prevention scheme must be made part of the public health project at district and taluk levels and in PHCs all over the country. Then only the goal of eliminating cervical cancer by 2030 will be attainable.

Translated by V. Mariappan.