

Cervical Cancer: A highly Preventable Gynaecological Cancer

Key Messages

- ※ In Hong Kong, cervical cancer accounted for a considerable share of the disease burden in women. In 2017, there were 516 new cases of cervical cancer diagnosed and 150 cervical cancer deaths.
- ※ To reduce the risk of developing cervical cancer, women can take primary preventive measures that include getting human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination (also named as cervical cancer vaccination) before having sexual experience, practising safer sex (such as using condom during sexual activity and avoiding multiple sexual partners) to reduce the risk of HPV infection and to protect against sexually transmitted diseases, and avoiding smoking etc.
- ※ Cervical cancer screening is a secondary preventive measure which aims to detect pre-cancerous changes or early cancer before symptoms appear, so that timely treatment can be initiated. Since 2004, the Hong Kong Government launched the territory-wide Cervical Screening Programme in collaboration with local healthcare professionals to encourage and facilitate women to have regular cervical cancer screening.
- ※ The Cancer Expert Working Group on Cancer Prevention and Screening under the Cancer Coordinating Committee of the Hong Kong Government recommends women aged 25 to 64 who ever had sexual experience to have cervical cancer screening by cytology every three years after two consecutive normal annual smears. Screening may be discontinued in women aged 65 or above if three previous consecutive smears within ten years are normal. Women at or above 65 years of age who have never had a cervical smear should have the test. For more information about cervical cancer screening, please visit www.cervicalscreening.gov.hk/.



I'm Joy.
Stay healthy and happy,
you should have regular
cervical cancer screening !

Cervical Cancer : A highly Preventable Gynaecological Cancer

Gynaecological cancers refer to a group of cancers involving the female reproductive system that includes the uterus (cervix and corpus), ovaries, vagina, vulva, fallopian tubes and other female genital organs. Among all, cervical cancer is posing huge disease burden worldwide. In 2018, it was estimated that about 0.57 million new cases and 0.31 million deaths attributed to cervical cancer occurred globally.¹

Causes and Risk Factors of Cervical Cancers

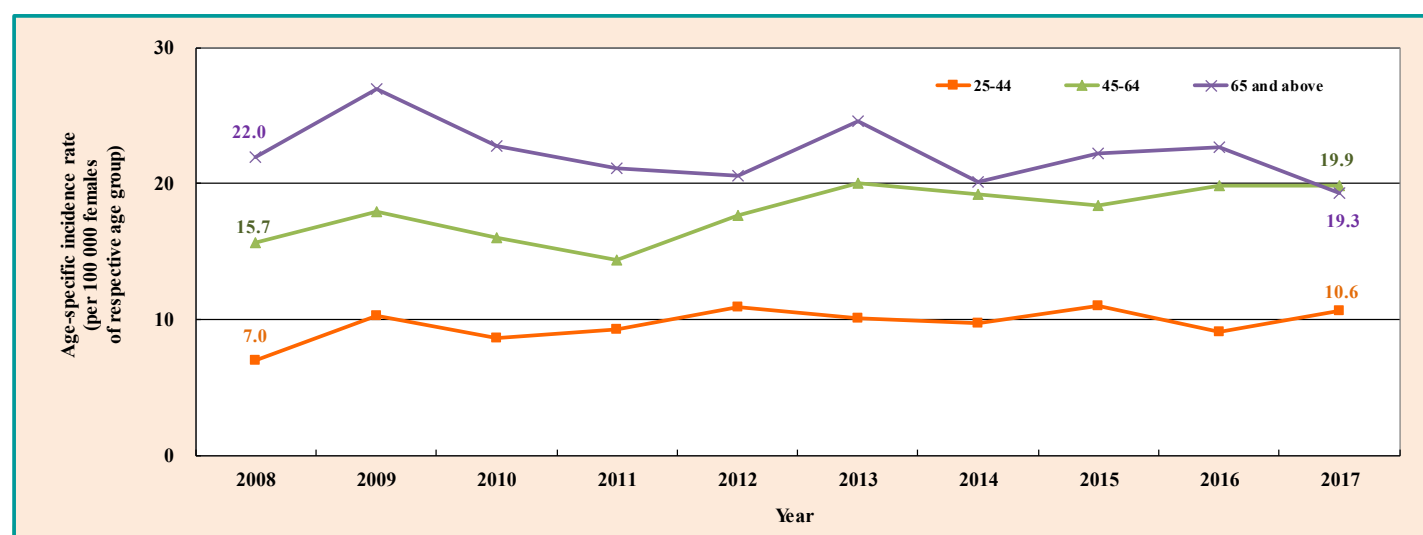
A number of factors are significantly associated with an increased risk of developing cervical (and other gynaecological) cancers. Among the risk factors that are potentially modifiable, nearly all cervical cancers can be attributable to chronic infection with high-risk HPV.² Tobacco use has been classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) of the World Health Organization (WHO) as a Group 1 carcinogen (i.e. sufficient evidence of cancer-causing in human) that smoking would increase the risk of developing cancer of the cervix. Women who started sexual intercourse at early age or have multiple sexual partners are also at higher risk of developing cervical cancer. Other risk factors associated with the occurrence of cervical cancer include weakened

immunity (e.g. being infected with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)), co-infection with sexually-transmitted diseases (such as chlamydia infections), long term use of oral contraceptives pills for more than 5 years (the risk returns to normal after 10 years of cessation) and younger age at first pregnancy or increasing parity.³ Thus, avoiding those modifiable risk factors are of utmost importance for reducing the risk of developing cervical (and certain gynaecological) cancers.

Local Situation

In Hong Kong, cervical cancers accounted for a considerable share of the disease burden in women. In 2017, there were 516 new cases of cervical cancer diagnosed and 150 cervical cancer deaths.^{4, 5} In fact, the age-standardised incidence rate for cervical cancer rose from 6.3 per 100 000 standard population in 2008 to 7.6 per 100 000 standard population in 2017.⁴ Analysed by age group, incidence rate of cervical cancer per 100 000 female population fell among females aged 65 and above from 22.0 in 2008 to 19.3 in 2017. Yet, the corresponding incidence rate for females aged 25 to 44 and those aged 45 to 64 rose from 7.0 to 10.6 and 15.7 to 19.9 respectively (Figure 1).⁴

Figure 1: Incidence rate of cervical cancer by age group, 2008 to 2017



Source: Hong Kong Cancer Registry, Hospital Authority

Awareness, Screening and Prevention of Cervical Cancer

Cancer awareness involves knowing what the causes or risk factors of the diseases are so that appropriate precautions can be taken to prevent its occurrence, being familiar with the symptoms, and then reporting any unusual observations and seeking appropriate treatment without delay. For most cervical cancer, the symptoms may not be easily noticeable at early stage. A common symptom of cervical cancer is abnormal vaginal bleeding, which includes vaginal bleeding between periods, during or after sex or after menopause. Consult a doctor as soon as possible if abnormal vaginal bleeding appears, albeit it may not necessarily mean the presence of cancer.

Cancer screening aims to detect pre-cancerous changes or early cancer before symptoms appear, so that timely treatment can be initiated. To date, there is sufficient evidence to prove that regular cervical cancer screening is an effective way to prevent cervical cancer. Since 2004, the Hong Kong Government launched the territory-wide Cervical Screening Programme (CSP) in collaboration with local healthcare professionals to encourage and facilitate women to have regular cervical cancer screening.

Box 1 presents the current recommendations on cervical cancer screening made by the Cancer Expert Working Group on Cancer Prevention and Screening (CEWG) established under the Cancer Coordinating Committee of the Hong Kong Government.³ In Hong Kong, both public and private healthcare sectors as well as non-government organisations provide cervical cancer screening. Maternal and Child Health Centres of the Department of Health provide cervical smear screening for women aged 25 or above who ever had sexual experience. Please call Cervical Screening Phone Booking Hotline 3166 6631 to book the appointment. A list of healthcare providers or organisations registered with the CSP is also available at www.cervicalscreening.gov.hk/. It is advisable to contact these service providers direct for details e.g. appointment procedures, service charges etc.

Box 1: CEWG's Recommendations on cervical cancer screening

For asymptomatic women at average risk

- Women aged 25 to 64 who ever had sexual experience are recommended to have cervical cancer screening by cytology every three years after two consecutive normal annual smears.
- Screening may be discontinued in women aged 65 or above if three previous consecutive smears within 10 years are normal.
- Women at or above 65 years of age who have never had a cervical smear should have the test.

For women at increased risk

- Women aged 21 to 24 who ever had sexual experience and with risk factors for HPV acquisition/persistence or cervical cancer (e.g. early first sexual intercourse, multiple sexual partners, tobacco use) are considered at increased risk. They may be screened by cytology every three years after two consecutive normal annual smears, depending on doctor's assessment.
- Other women at high risk of developing cervical cancer may require more frequent screens based on doctor's assessment.

With a view to reducing the cancer burden of local population and improving the quality of life and survivorship of cancer patients through setting work priorities and directions, the Hong Kong Government launched the Hong Kong Cancer Strategy in July 2019.⁶ The promulgation of the Cancer Strategy is an important milestone in our united fight against cancer, including cervical cancer. Among the expected outcomes set in the Hong Kong Cancer Strategy 2019, two are specific to cervical cancer, namely interim target of 70% coverage for completion of two doses of HPV vaccination among the first cohort, and a 10% relative increase in coverage for cervical cancer screening. While the Government will continue to foster co-operation across sectors and work in close partnership with the community and members of the public to build a health-enhancing environment, females can reduce the risk of developing cervical cancer by leading a healthy lifestyle and taking appropriate precautions (Box 2). For updates on cancer prevention news, please visit the 'Healthy League' facebook fan page (www.facebook.com/HealthyLeague). Members of the public are most welcomed to join Joy, Captain AC and other Healthy League members in cancer prevention and control.

Box 2: General advice for reducing the risk of getting cervical cancer

- ✓ Get HPV vaccination (also named as cervical cancer vaccination) before having sexual experience
- ✓ Practise safer sex (such as using condom during sexual activity and avoiding multiple sexual partners) to reduce the risk of HPV infection and to protect against sexually transmitted diseases
- ✓ Avoid smoking
- ✓ Have cervical cancer screening regularly* to detect and treat any pre-malignant cell changes

Note: * Women who have received HPV vaccination still need regular cervical cancer screening because HPV vaccination does not protect against infection by the HPV types that are not found in the vaccines, nor can clear the virus in those who have already been infected.

References

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3. Recommendations on Prevention and Screening for Cervical Cancer for Health Professionals. Hong Kong SAR: Cancer Expert Working Group on Cancer Prevention and Screening, May 2018.
4. Hong Kong Cancer Statistics. Hong Kong SAR: Hong Kong Cancer Registry, Hospital Authority. Available at www3.ha.org.hk/cancereg/ [Accessed November 2019].
5. Mortality Statistics, 2017. Hong Kong SAR: Department of Health and Census and Statistics Department.
6. Hong Kong Cancer Strategy 2019. Hong Kong SAR: Food and Health Bureau, Department of Health and Hospital Authority.



Data Brief

Ten Most Common Cancers among Hong Kong Women in 2017

Rank	Site	Number of New cases	Relative Frequency	Crude incidence rate*
1	Breast	4 373	27.0%	109.3
2	Colorectum	2 332	14.4%	58.3
3	Lung	1 931	11.9%	48.3
4	Corpus uteri	1 076	6.6%	26.9
5	Thyroid	703	4.3%	17.6
6	Ovary	651	4.0%	16.3
7	Stomach	552	3.4%	13.8
8	Non-melanoma skin	532	3.3%	13.3
9	Cervix	516	3.2%	12.9
10	Non-Hodgkin lymphoma	438	2.7%	11.0

Note: * Per 100 000 female population

Source: Hong Kong Cancer Registry, Hospital Authority, www3.ha.org.hk/cancereg/topten.html

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) WATCH is dedicated to promote public's awareness of and disseminate health information about non-communicable diseases and related issues, and the importance of their prevention and control. It is also an indication of our commitments in responsive risk communication and to address the growing non-communicable disease threats to the health of our community. The Editorial Board welcomes your views and comments. Please send all comments and/or questions to so_dp3@dh.gov.hk.

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