

**MRL**[®] Insights

Cervical Cancer in Nigeria and Africa: *What Every Woman Should Know.*

Introduction

January is recognised globally as Cervical Cancer Awareness Month, a time dedicated to raise awareness about one of the most preventable yet deadly cancers affecting women. Fundamentally, this month exists to educate women, families, communities, and policymakers about cervical cancer, promote early screening and vaccination, and challenge the silence and stigma surrounding women's reproductive health.

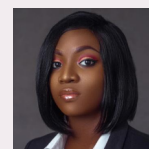
In Africa, this awareness is especially critical. Cervical cancer remains a leading cause of cancer-related deaths among women, despite being largely preventable. In this context, awareness months are not symbolic, they are lifesaving. Awareness months provide an opportunity to highlight gaps in knowledge of the disease, mitigate stigmas and create room to share information on the available resources available to support people. Advocacy on these issues, help reinforce the importance of awareness and subsequently educates people on prevention, early detection, and treatment.

At MRL[®] Public Sector Consultants, we place a spotlight on health. Our commitment to the Health Sector Transformation Programme (HSTP), an ongoing programme currently being implemented in Niger State, Nigeria, supports health sector restoration and reformation. Most importantly, we advocate for health awareness and education because the topics are foundational to our mission to building strong health systems. Without informed populations, even the best policies can fail to deliver impact.

The Current Reality

Cervical cancer is one of the most prevalent cancers affecting women across Africa, including Nigeria (Arbyn et al., 2020). Every year, thousands of women are diagnosed late, and tragically, many die because the disease is often detected at an advanced stage. Additionally, limited awareness, poor screening coverage, and inadequate access to HPV vaccination continue to fuel high mortality rates across the continent (WHO 2025). In many African countries, cervical cancer is still perceived as a death sentence rather than a preventable disease largely due to late diagnosis and weak preventive systems. However, unlike many other cancers, cervical cancer is largely preventable.

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The Causes

The primary cause of cervical cancer is persistent infection with high-risk human papillomavirus (HPV), particularly HPV-16 and HPV-18 (Walboomers et al., 1999). These viruses are transmitted through sexual contact and often show no immediate symptoms. Over time, however, untreated HPV infection can cause abnormal changes in cervical cells, progressing to cancer. The good news is that HPV infection is preventable through vaccination, and cervical cancer is highly treatable when detected early. Therefore, prevention and early detection are the most powerful tools available. Cervical cancer disproportionately affects women in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs). In Nigeria alone, estimates suggest over 12,000 new cases annually, with more than 8,000 deaths each year (WHO, 2021). Across sub-Saharan Africa, the pattern is similar: most women are diagnosed at advanced stages.

In rural areas across northern Nigeria, research showed a higher rate of HPV compared to urban areas. For example in Nasarawa State it showed an 82.6% HPV prevalence in one surveyed group, while Plateau State and Abuja had rates around 30%. Cultural beliefs, fear, stigma, and misinformation often discourage women from seeking preventive care (Zakka, A. W., et al. 2023). However, urban areas are not exempt. In cities like Lagos, Abuja, or Nairobi, cost, lack of awareness, and competing priorities remain major barriers even where services exist.

While any woman can develop cervical cancer, certain factors increase the risk:

- HPV infection: The strongest risk factor; often asymptomatic.
- Early sexual activity and multiple sexual partners: Increase exposure to HPV.
- HIV and immune-suppressing conditions: Reduce the body's ability to clear HPV infection.
- Lifestyle and environmental factors: Smoking, poor nutrition, and limited access to healthcare.
- Socioeconomic factors: Low income and education levels are linked to reduced screening uptake.

Source: *World Health Organisation, 2025.*

In Africa, these risk factors intersect with systemic barriers, weak health systems, poverty, and gender inequality explaining why the disease often goes undetected until it becomes life-threatening.

Recognising Symptoms

Cervical cancer can be cured if diagnosed early. Recognising symptoms and seeking medical advice is therefore critical. Women should consult a healthcare professional if they experience:

- Unusual vaginal bleeding (between periods, after sex, or after menopause).
- Persistent or foul-smelling vaginal discharge.
- Pelvic, back, or leg pain.
- Unexplained weight loss, fatigue, or loss of appetite.
- Vaginal discomfort.
- Swelling in the legs.

However, it is important to note that early cervical cancer may have no symptoms at all, reinforcing the importance of routine screening.

Preventative Measures

HPV Vaccination: A Powerful Preventive Tool

The HPV vaccine is a game-changer in cervical cancer prevention. It is most effective when administered to girls aged 9–14 years, before sexual activity begins (WHO, 2021). Nigeria has begun rolling out HPV vaccination programmes; however, coverage remains low. In contrast, countries such as Rwanda, which achieved high national vaccination coverage, have recorded dramatic reductions in HPV infection and cervical cancer rates (Kavanagh et al., 2017). This demonstrates what is possible with political will, public education, and strong delivery systems. Screening allows pre-cancerous changes to be detected and treated before cancer develops.

Common screening methods include:

- Pap smear (cytology): Detects abnormal cervical cells.
- HPV DNA testing: Identifies high-risk HPV strains.
- Visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA): A low-cost option suitable for rural and low-resource settings.

In Nigeria, screening coverage remains limited due to lack of awareness, fear, cost, and limited-service availability. While governments and NGOs are working to expand access, sustained advocacy and community-based education are urgently needed. The limited uptake of screening services in Nigeria often results in late presentation, meaning many women are diagnosed only when the disease has already progressed. This delay significantly influences treatment options and outcomes, making early detection critical to improving survival and reducing mortality.

Treatment depends on the stage of the disease:

- Early-stage cancer: Often treated with surgery.
- Locally advanced cancer: Requires chemotherapy and radiotherapy.
- Advanced or recurrent cancer: Focuses on palliative care and symptom management.

Access to treatment remains unequal across Nigeria and Africa. Urban centres are better equipped than rural regions, and delayed diagnosis remains a major contributor to high mortality rates. Despite being preventable, cervical cancer continues to claim thousands of African lives because:

- HPV vaccination coverage is low.
- Screening services are limited or unaffordable.
- Cultural myths and stigma persist.
- Many women present late due to lack of awareness.

To address this, African countries need integrated approaches combining vaccination, accessible screening, community education, and affordable treatment.

At MRL[®], our work through the Health Sector Transformation Programmes (HSTP) recognises that strong health systems depend on informed communities, capable institutions, and effective leadership. Cervical cancer awareness directly aligns with our mission to strengthen public health delivery, promote equity, and support evidence-based policy and education. Health awareness is not optional it is foundational to better living.

Every woman deserves the chance to live free from cervical cancer. With awareness, education, and action, this goal is achievable.

Key Takeaways

- Cervical cancer is preventable and treatable when detected early.
- HPV vaccination and regular screening save lives.
- Awareness and education are critical in Nigeria and across Africa.
- Health systems must prioritise women's preventive care.
- Collective action policy, education, and community engagement can eliminate cervical cancer.

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