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*Cervical cancer is preventable and can be treated painlessly in the first few stages, but awareness is critical*

Michelle Baldwin, a terminal patient of cervical cancer from the United States, had not undergone cervical cancer screening tests for 10 years and then was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She recently came to India to raise awareness as cervical cancer is the number one killer of women in India. Jade Goody, a British celebrity, was diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer which had already spread in the body. She underwent treatment for this cancer but nothing helped her and she died in 2009. Her story raised awareness about cervical cancer prevention in the United Kingdom and increased the number of women getting examined for this preventable disease.

Cervical cancer is the cancer of the mouth of the uterus. In a majority of the developed countries, there are organised programmes for cervical cancer prevention. Bhutan and Bangladesh have also implemented such programmes, but no such programme exists in India, says Dr Smita Joshi, principal investigator of the cervical cancer screening programme of Prayas and Hirabai Cowasji Jehangir Medical Research Institute. It is estimated that approximately 1,25,000 new cases are detected and 75,000 women die every year due to cervical cancer in India. This accounts for 205 women dying due to cervical cancer every day for a preventable cancer.

Usually, women go to a doctor when they have any symptom of cervical cancer, such as vaginal discharge, irregular spotting or bleeding, spotting after sex, backache, difficulty while passing urine, etc. But at this juncture, this cancer is in the advanced stage which requires major surgery and/or radiation. Cervical cancer can now be prevented by vaccination of girls between the age group of 9 and 25; ideally before they start their sexual activity. Three doses of the HPV vaccine should be given to girls before their marriage at an interval of 0, two months and six months.

For adult women, vaccination is not that useful but they can undergo a simple examination to detect certain abnormalities in the cells which may develop into a cancer few years later. But for this type of prevention, all healthy women should get themselves examined. Majority of the people are aware of prevention of certain diseases by vaccination but they are not aware of prevention by early detection and thereby preventing progression to a serious disease.

It is now established that cervical cancer is caused by long-term infection by one or more of the high risk types of Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). About 70 to 80 percent of all women get infected with HPV at least once during their life time. However, majority of them clear this infection by the natural immune mechanism of their body. Those who are unable to clear this infection may develop abnormal cells in the cervix and these women are at risk of developing cervical cancer 15-20 years later. This long period provides us an opportunity to detect women who have this infection with HPV or who have abnormal cells. There are no symptoms if there is infection with HPV or if there are abnormal cells in the cervix. But these abnormalities can be detected if a woman gets herself examined.

This examination is simple, it is like any gynaecological examination and it requires only five minutes. Early abnormalities in the cervix can be effectively treated by a simple OPD procedure which does not require any anaesthesia and is painless. Hysterectomy (operation to remove the uterus) is generally not required when there is no cancer. According to Joshi, it is recommended that all women above the age of thirty should get screened

for cervical cancer regularly. If these abnormalities are detected and treated appropriately, cervical cancer can be prevented.