

Cervical Cancer

When women have access to timely care, cervical cancer is highly preventable and treatable. Yet it remains one of the most common cancers faced by women worldwide. Nine in 10 cervical cancer deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries where access to preventive services and treatment is limited.

Nearly all cases of cervical cancer are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV), an extremely common sexually transmitted infection that, when left untreated, can progress to cancer. But highly effective preventive tools exist.

In 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) unveiled the global strategy for cervical cancer elimination– the first global commitment to eliminate a cancer. The strategy is based on three pillars: HPV vaccination to protect young girls from infection; screening and treatment of the early signs of cervical cancer; and access to cancer treatment.

Our work focuses on the second pillar, accelerating access to vital screening and treatment services – known as secondary prevention – for women in low- and middle-income countries. These initiatives, which we launched in response to WHO’s initial call to action in 2018, have helped kickstart cervical cancer elimination programs in 14 low- and middle-income countries and are laying the foundation for global scale up.

Photo: A healthcare worker in Rwanda explains cervical cancer screening to one of the many women who are now accessing critical preventive services, December 2022, Kigali, Rwanda. © Unitaid



How we work

At Unitaid, we save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income settings. We identify innovative treatments and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast.

We are the leading funder of innovative tools to find and treat cervical precancer in women in low- and middle-income countries. Together with our partners, the Clinton Health Access Initiative, Expertise France, Jhpiego and the Union for International Cancer Control, we have focused on overcoming access barriers to make key prevention tools and strategies available and affordable where they are most needed. Our work across three continents has developed effective models for secondary prevention and is laying the groundwork for national cervical cancer elimination programs worldwide.

Nearly

1.6m

women in 14 countries
across three continents
have been screened for
cervical cancer through
our initiatives

In pursuit of cervical cancer elimination: We focus on screening and treatment services that can be applied to lower-income settings. Just two years after the launch of WHO's elimination strategy, our programs in seven countries had already rolled out models that were successfully reaching the WHO target to provide treatment to 90% of women identified with precancerous cervical cells.

More affordable, more accurate tests: HPV tests are the most accurate way to identify if a woman is at higher risk of developing cervical cancer and perform significantly better than the alternative subjective screening method that relies on visual inspection of the cervix. These tests represent a critical and cost-effective advance in cervical cancer screening. Together with our partners, we have secured agreements that have reduced the price of HPV tests by nearly 40%. These tests are now widely available for global uptake and our programs have helped integrate HPV testing into national cervical cancer programs in 11 countries so far.

Addressing deterrents to testing: Increasingly available HPV tests mean cervical cancer screening can be performed quickly and accurately in more places. However, another significant barrier stands in the way of access: the pelvic exam that has traditionally been used to collect a cervical sample can, for reasons ranging from cultural or religious considerations, fear, or shame, deter women from getting tested. Learning from our successful experience building acceptance of HIV self-testing, we have pioneered self-collection strategies for HPV testing that are expected to make screening easier and more acceptable.

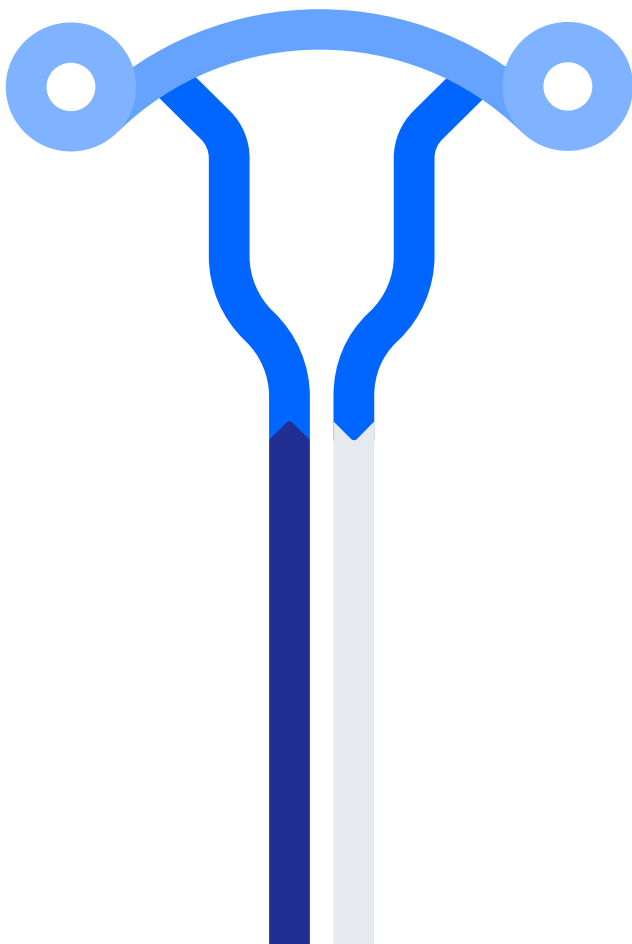
Ensuring tools work in low-resource settings:

When precancerous lesions on the cervix are identified early and removed, it significantly reduces the risk of progression to cancer. But cryotherapy, the common method for removing these cells, requires heavy machinery and expensive compressed gas, severely limiting its use in resource-limited settings. Instead, we have helped introduce easy-to use, hand-held, battery-powered thermal ablation devices, and secured pricing reductions of nearly 50%. In practice, these tools allow treatment to be performed in primary health care settings, or even as part of outreach programs, at one-quarter of the cost of cryotherapy per woman treated. Combined with evidence demonstrating how to integrate services into existing health programs, we now have a successful screen-and-treat package of care that is ready for rollout.

Our impact

When our work began, innovative tools for the screening and treatment of cervical cancer were in limited use in just a handful of low- and middle-income countries. Our focus on developing and implementing successful models of care has led most of our project countries to adopt tools into their national guidelines. Our goal is to bring additional partners on board to take effective programming to scale in all lower-resourced settings, to enable access to lifesaving cervical cancer screening and treatment for millions of women.

- Over 1.6 million women in 14 countries across three continents have been screened for cervical cancer through our initiatives, with over 50% of those who received an HPV test opting for self-collection. These programs have trained tens of thousands of health workers and greatly expanded the number of health care facilities offering lifesaving screening and preventive treatment.
- Negotiations secured a 40% reduction in the price of HPV tests and a 45% reduction in the price of thermal ablation devices.
- Through a catalytic procurement of over 6000 thermal ablation devices, we secured the introduction and adoption of this critical tool in 28 countries – one-fifth of all low- and middle-income countries globally. Notably, health authorities have placed over 85% of deployed devices at primary (48%) or secondary (37%) health facilities, shifting treatment from centralized tertiary care and thus improving access.
- Over 88% of women treated through our cervical cancer prevention programs who tested positive for precancer have received follow-up treatment.





Case Study:

Laying the groundwork for cervical cancer elimination

“I was scared – I thought that I had cancer,” says Aminata, upon learning that she had screened positive for the human papillomavirus (HPV). “But [the health worker] explained that I only had the virus that causes cervical cancer.”

Cervical cancer occurs when abnormal cells on the cervix grow and replicate, almost always because of an HPV infection left untreated. Regular screening with high-performing tests is essential to catching precancerous cells early, and treatment to remove the cells is critical in averting the progression to cancer. But preventive services have been largely unavailable in low- and middle-income countries where 90% of cervical cancer deaths occur.

Innovative solutions hold promise – new HPV tests help accurately screen for the infection, and simple to operate, battery-based portable devices for treating precancerous cells are better adapted to settings with limited resources. Our programs in 14 countries are demonstrating how to integrate these tools into existing health services and promoting a more affordable and highly effective cervical cancer prevention model that is ready for broad scale up.

“I had the treatment and the following year I tested negative,” says Aminata, one of nearly 1.5 million women who has already been reached with preventive services through the Unitaid program. “I now encourage other local women to get tested. I tell them that they shouldn’t fear the test – it’s the disease that they should fear!”



Looking ahead

Broader availability of more affordable HPV tests, self-collection methods and portable treatment devices means cervical cancer services can reach women beyond health care settings. We are now working to demonstrate how self-collection and community-led interventions can bring vital cervical cancer prevention to women where they live, while continuing work to further reduce the cost of screening and treatment tools so more countries can implement them at scale and reach elimination targets. And we are scoping the innovation pipeline for promising new solutions, including those that use artificial intelligence to interpret results, to bring screening and treatment services closer to women, improve affordability of the response, and therefore accelerate progress toward eliminating one of the most preventable, treatable forms of cancer.

About Unitaid:

We save lives by making new health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. We work with partners to identify innovative treatments, tests and tools, help tackle the market barriers that are holding them back, and get them to the people who need them most – fast. Since we were created in 2006, we have unlocked access to more than 100 groundbreaking health products to help address the world’s biggest health challenges, including HIV, TB, and malaria; women’s and children’s health; and pandemic prevention, preparedness and response. Every year, more than 300 million people benefit from the products we’ve helped roll out.