

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 this cancer can be prevented with highly effective approaches and tools.

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 people 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 efforts, which launched in response to WHO's initial call to action in 2018, is helping to kickstart cervical cancer elimination programs in 26 low- and middle-income countries and 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 vital health products available and affordable for people in low- and middle-income countries. 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 a leading funder of innovative tools to find and treat cervical pre-cancer in women in low- and middle-income countries. Together with our partners, the Clinton Health Access Initiative, Expertise France, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the WHO, we are fast-tracking elimination efforts, while supporting solutions that are country-owned, regionally tailored and globally relevant.

Building on more than six years of experience, we are working with our partners to support governments across three continents to expand access to affordable HPV testing and portable treatment devices, develop national strategies, and bring services closer to women – whether in remote villages, island states or urban clinics.

Over 1.6 million 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. Our initial programs in 14 countries developed and implemented models that successfully demonstrated how to reach the WHO target to provide treatment to 90% of women identified with precancerous cervical cells. New investments are now helping additional countries adopt and implement proven strategies as they work towards reaching global targets by 2030.

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 negotiated lower prices and helped integrate HPV testing into national cervical cancer programs in 11 countries so far, as we support additional countries to adopt this tool and bring care closer to women.

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 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. This approach brings screening closer to where women live, using community-based delivery models that forego the need to visit a health facility.

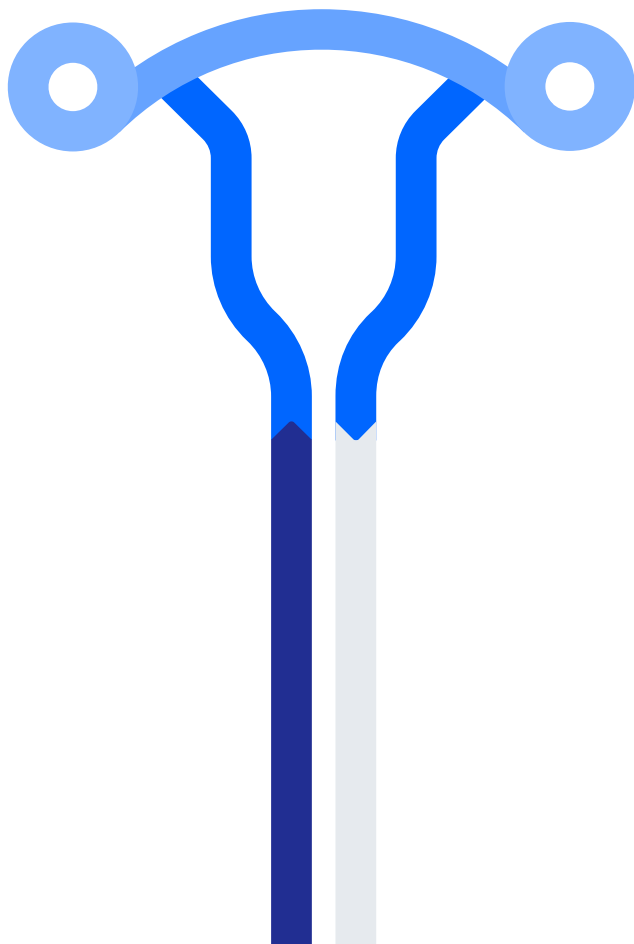
Ensuring tools work in low-resource settings:

When precancerous lesions on the cervix are identified early and removed, it significantly reduces the risk of progression to cancer. But cryotherapy, a 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 brought down the cost of the new tool. In practice, these devices 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. Now, most countries where our programs are operating have integrated cervical cancer tools and implementation models into their national guidelines. Our goal now is to support countries to take effective programming to scale, 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 6,000 thermal ablation devices, we secured the introduction and adoption of this critical tool in 28 countries - one-fifth of all LMICs globally. Notably, health authorities have placed the majority of deployed devices at primary (48 percent) or secondary (37 percent) health facilities, shifting treatment from centralized tertiary care and thus improving access.**
- **Nearly 90% 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 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 can stop the progression to cancer. However, these preventive services have been largely unavailable in low- and middle-income countries where 90% of cervical cancer deaths occur.

Unitaid is supporting cervical cancer elimination in 26 countries, demonstrating how to integrate highly accurate HPV tests and simple to operate, battery-based portable devices that remove precancerous cells. These innovations provide solutions that are better suited to health settings that may lack electricity or for areas where many women live in remote areas, far from a hospital.

“I had the treatment and the following year I tested negative,” says Aminata, one of over 1.6 million women who has already been reached with preventive services through Unitaid’s 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. While we support more countries to adopt these tools with our latest wave of investments, we will continue working on further reducing the cost of screening and treatment tools. 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.