

WI research on public awareness of the basic science behind cervical cancer in England and Wales

Overview

Between August and October 2020, the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) carried out a survey to understand attitudes towards cervical screening and sampling methods in England and Wales. All women and people with a cervix aged 25 and over were invited to take part. There was no upper age limit.

This briefing focusses on the findings of one strand of this research, public awareness of the basic science behind cervical cancer.

You can find out more about the other themes identified in our research [here](#).

This research was part of an ongoing WI project on cervical screening – our 5 Minutes that Matter campaign which seeks to raise awareness of the importance of attending routine cervical screenings, and support more women to make an informed decision about whether or not to take up their invitations.

What is HPV and how is it linked to cervical cancer?

In almost all cases, cervical cancers are caused by persistent high-risk HPV (human papillomavirus), infections which cause changes to the cervical cells. HPV is passed on through skin-to-skin contact.

In 2019, the cervical screening programme changed to primary HPV testing. This means that samples are first tested for the types of HPV that can cause cervical cancer. If the sample is positive for HPV, it will be checked for abnormal cells.

Key messages from the WI's findings on public awareness of the basic science behind cervical cancer:

- There is still a lot of stigma surrounding HPV, with many women saying they would feel uncomfortable talking to friends or family about it if they tested positive.
- HPV is often misunderstood - there is a need for greater awareness of how common the virus is and how it is transmitted.
- Most respondents were unaware that that the cervical screening programme changed to HPV-first testing in 2019. This may result in confusion about what cervical screening test results now mean which focus on whether HPV is found in your sample.

What is the WI calling for on this issue?

- **It is vital that the stigma around HPV is addressed, so that people feel able to talk about it and aren't deterred from attending cervical screening. Improved education and public awareness of HPV is crucial in order to normalise it.**

Demographics of the WI's survey respondents:

In total we received 2,849 complete responses.

- 87% were based in England and 12% in Wales. Less than 1% were based in each of the following areas: Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man
- 39% were aged 25 to 49
- 38% were aged 50 to 64
- 20% were aged 65 to 74
- 3% were aged 75 or older

Public awareness of the basic science behind cervical cancer

Responses of those aged 25 to 64:

- 63% of respondents aged 25 to 64 were unaware that the cervical screening programme changed to HPV-first testing in 2019.
- 85% of people were aware that in almost all cases, cervical cancers are caused by persistent high-risk HPV infections, which cause changes to the cervical cells. 13% were not.
- 29% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I am susceptible to getting HPV'. 36% are undecided. 35% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Respondents were asked how they think HPV is transmitted – examples are provided below, many of which suggest there is a level of misunderstanding about HPV.

Unprotected sex	Blood transfusions	Saliva
Poor hygiene	A faulty gene	Open sores
Sexual contact	Oral sex	Tampons
Genetics	From a male partner	Kissing
I didn't think it could be	By touch	Unclean toilet facilities
In bodily fluids	Bacteria	Intimacy
No idea	Airborne	Sustained skin-to-skin contact
Multiple sexual partners	Hereditary	Genital infection
	Not sexually transmitted	

- 23% of people aged 25 to 64 disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'If I tested positive for HPV, I would feel comfortable discussing it with my friends. A further 26% were undecided.
- 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'If I tested positive for HPV, I would feel comfortable discussing it with my family. A further 24% were undecided.

Respondents were invited to elaborate on their answer – examples include the below which, in particular, highlight the stigma surrounding HPV.

“Feel it's like saying sexual disease”

“Sounds unpleasant unless you are educated about it”

“I would feel embarrassment talking about HPV as it is sexually transmitted. I would feel slightly 'soiled'”

“Still a stigma around this- I might be comfortable but friends and family would not be”

“Because of the stigma attached to HPV and Herpes”

“I would feel judged and ashamed”

However, we also heard from many women about how they feel it's important to have these conversations and the need for greater education on it:

“We need to talk about it because it brings awareness rather than shame”

“Friends and family are my support network whatever the outcome”

“This is a common virus, nothing to be ashamed about”

“I don't know enough about HPV to discuss it properly”

“I am happy to discuss my health as it might help someone else”

“I would want to discuss this and also an opportunity to inform and educate myself, my family and friends”

“I don't know how serious it is, so a part of me would be reluctant to worry friends and family until I had more information about it”

“Educating people can help stop them feeling embarrassed themselves”

“I think it's important to have honest conversations to break down stigma around STDs & other health conditions”

“As a nurse I feel it is important to be as open as possible, on the subject, to help others”

“Again, only a stigma if you let it become one”

“I think it's important to normalise talking about important medical topics in order to help reduce stigma”

“It is nothing to feel embarrassed about”

Differences in attitudes and preferences between age groups:

- Awareness of the link between high-risk HPV infections and cervical cancer was similar between age groups (83% of 50 to 64 year olds were aware of this link, compared with 87% of 25 to 49 year olds).
- Those aged 50 to 64 and 65 and over were more likely than those aged 25 to 49 to say they were not susceptible to getting HPV (43%, 49% and 27% respectively).

Further information

Please contact the NFWI's Public Affairs Department at pa@nfwl.org.uk for more information about this research.

To find out more about the WI's 5 Minutes that Matter campaign, visit www.thewi.org.uk/campaigns/key-and-current-campaigns/5-minutes-that-matter