



## **Updates on HPV Vaccination in Zambia**

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Like many other SSA countries, Zambia has one of the highest cervical cancer incidences and mortality rates in the world <sup>[2]</sup> and faces many challenges in treating those diagnosed with the disease. According to the Global Cancer Observatory, Zambia's cervical cancer-related incidences and mortality stand at 65.5 and 43.4 per 100,000 making it one of the most common cancers in the country. This translates to 2,330 new cervical cancer cases and 1,380 deaths from the disease each year.

Persistent infection with HPV and rapid progression to malignancy is characteristic in women co-infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), especially in high epidemic regions like Zambia. Women living with HIV are six times more likely to have cervical cancer than those without HIV. The 2021 Zambia Population-based HIV/AIDS Impact Assessment (ZAMPHIA) reported a National HIV prevalence of 11% among people aged 15 years and older, however, when disaggregated by sex, women bear a higher prevalence of 13.9% while it is 8% in males.

Human papillomavirus vaccination in Zambia has been largely supported by GAVI, the vaccine alliance. Since 2019, a two-dose HPV vaccine has been offered for free to 14-year-old girls 12 months apart for the whole country, following a demonstration project done between 2013-2017 in Lusaka Province. This age group of older girls was selected before they could age out owing to global HPV vaccine shortages. The national HPV vaccination program is campaign-based, conducted annually during the first round of Child Health Week (CHWk1), lasting six days from Monday to Saturday, after which walk-in vaccinations are administered at the health facilities for those who could have missed out during the campaign. The primary vaccination platforms include static at health facilities and outreach at schools and other community points. However, uptake has been low owing to different factors such as low knowledge levels, parental refusal to consent for daughters' vaccination, beliefs in myths and misinformation, and recently, school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its prevention measures.

In September 2023, with continued support from the GAVI, Zambia launched a multi-age cohort (MAC) catch vaccination for girls aged 9-14 years with a single HPV vaccine dose. Plans are still underway on how the program will continue in the coming years.

## References

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