

MEASURING HPV VACCINATION AWARENESS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY AMONG YOUNG WOMEN

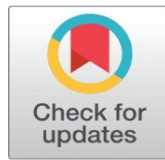
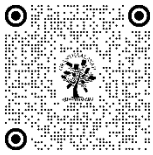
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ABSTRACT

"Despite being completely preventable, cervical cancer is the second most common type of cancer for Indian women. The mortality rate for India due to cervical cancer is higher than the global average. This paves a way for massive screening and immunization programs by the government. However, lack of awareness about the causes and preventive behaviours for cervical cancer among the population is prevalent. Vaccination as well as screening programs are bound to be unsuccessful unless the target population is vigilant about the severity of this disease. This paper uses online survey method to measure the HPV vaccination awareness and role of media in propagating HPV vaccination messages among young women. The major objectives of this study are to measure the level of awareness, understand the role of media in stimulating HPV vaccination awareness and find the factors that stop women from getting vaccinated. A total of 88 responses were received and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The findings of this study suggest that not only in marginalized communities but also in well empowered young women, the level of awareness for HPV vaccination is low. The media has so far not been utilized optimally for propagating the messages and alongside, lack of awareness, unavailability and high cost of vaccines are important factors that inhibit the uptake of vaccination by young women in India."

Keywords: Cervical cancer, HPV vaccination, India, Young Women

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common family of viruses that infects sexually active population at some point in their lives causing various types of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It is said to have more than 150 strains out of which 13 are identified to be carcinogenic. (Krokidi et. al, 2023) Amongst these 13 strains, HPV 16 and HPV 18 are widely associated with cervical cancer. (Nigam et. al, 2014) Cervical cancer is known to be the fourth most common type of cancer in women globally. Millions of new cases and deaths were reported solely due to cervical cancer in the year 2022. Out of all the deaths in the same year, over ninety five per cent came from low and middle income countries across

the globe. (WHO) Around three thousand million women are at the risk of getting cervical cancer in the world and four fifths of these women are from less developed countries. (Singh et. al, 2019).

In India, cervical cancer is the second most common type of cancer in women; breast cancer being the first one. (Taneja et. al, 2021) Globally the mortality rate for cervical cancer is increasing but currently, for India the mortality rate due to cervical cancer is even higher than the global estimates. Cervical cancer is preventable because it has a long pre-invasive period. Early diagnosis and treatment play a crucial role in reducing the mortality rate. Population based screening with Pap smear can reduce the cases of cervical cancer by 80 per cent in developed countries. Abiding to which almost 68-84 per cent women are being screened by Pap smear in developed countries but in India this screening rate is as low as 2.6-5 per cent. (Taneja et.al, 2021)

Generally HPV infections have no symptoms and can be eliminated by immune system on its own however if this infection is persistent in cervix and is left untreated for a long period of time, it leads to abnormal growth of cells which further multiplies and lead to cancer. It takes almost 15-20 years for such cells to become cancerous but in women with weak immune system, this process is catalyzed and takes only 5-10 years. (WHO)

In India, the health of women has already been a point of negligence for years. The Indian society is known to be patriarchal leading to health inequalities for women. Lack of awareness about HPV and cervical cancer is one of the major causes attributed to increasing number of cervical cancer cases in India. The government has been trying to include HPV vaccination in its national immunization program and lower down the cost of vaccination but challenges in successfully executing the initiatives of government are enormous considering the diversified demography and cultural practices of Indian population. Vaccine acceptance, parental attitudes, duration of vaccination and lack of epidemiological evidences for disease prioritization are broad issues that inhibit vaccination uptake by Indian population. (Chatterjee et. al., 2016)

Marginalized communities have mainly been known to be deprived of awareness and resources required to counter this disease. Existing literature suggests that educating women and rural inhabitants about the preventive behaviours, vaccination alternatives, massive screening can contribute to a decrease in cases of cervical cancer across the country and help India in achieving its three targets of curbing cervical cancer that include: vaccination of 90 per cent girls by age 15, high quality screening of 70 per cent women aged between 35 and 45, and providing treatment to 90 per cent women infected by cervical cancer.

Current study builds upon the existing literature and attempts to investigate the level of awareness among young women who are not marginalized conventionally but deprived of adequate health education. The researchers also dig in and try to find the factors that stop women from getting vaccinated even if and when they have the information.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To measure the level of awareness regarding HPV vaccination among young women
- 2) To evaluate the role of media in creating awareness about HPV vaccination and cervical cancer

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What is the level of awareness about HPV vaccination among young women in India?
- 2) What factors stop young women from getting HPV vaccination?

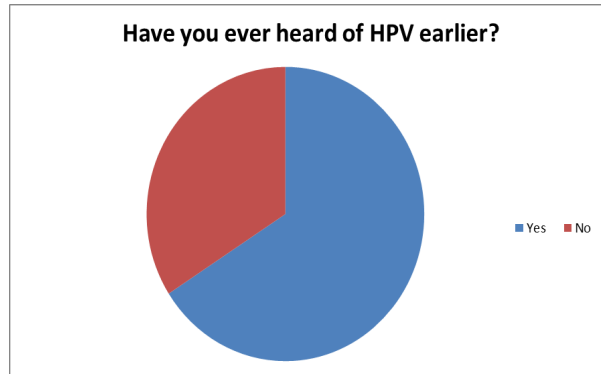
4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researchers adopted a quantitative method of survey to measure the level of awareness regarding HPV vaccination and cervical cancer among young women. These women were aged between 18-35 either working or studying across different cities in India. The data was collected using questionnaires adapted from 'Institute of Epidemiology and Healthcare', United Kingdom. The predesigned questionnaire was reframed as per the requirements of this study and converted into a digital form using Google workspace. The Google forms were circulated using social media and emails to 800 individuals out of which only 88 responses were received. The collected data from questionnaires was analyzed by applying the basic descriptive statistics.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Level of Awareness regarding HPV vaccination among young women

The findings of this survey reveal that the level of awareness regarding HPV vaccination is significantly low among the young women across India. Out of all the respondents for this survey, 34.1 per cent individuals reported to have never heard of Human Papillomavirus in their lifetime. Amongst those who had heard of HPV earlier, approximately 30 per cent thought that HPV doesn't cause cervical cancer.



Further, awareness about causes, treatment and preventive behaviours among the respondents was also found to be low. Most of the respondents chose cannot say as their response to questions that dealt with prevention and treatment of cervical cancer and HPV infections. A detailed account of the questions asked to serve this objective of the study is given in the table below.

Half of the respondents were not aware of the fact that HPV may or may not have visible signs or symptoms. 37.50 per cent of respondents said that HPV always has visible signs or symptoms. More than half of the responses indicate that individuals were not sure if AIDS can be caused by HPV or not. Both HPV and HIV are two different viruses, having HPV may increase the chances of getting infected by HIV but no research clearly claims that HPV can cause AIDS. Almost 18 per cent respondents appeared to be of the opinion that HPV can cause AIDS.

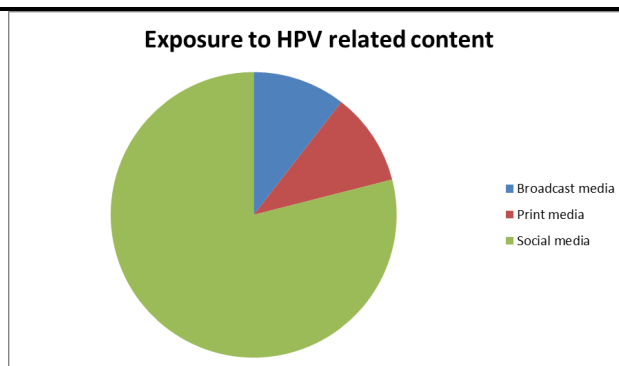
Having sex at an early age is one of the risk factors associated with infections caused by HPV but only 37 per cent respondents said that having sex at an early age increases the risk of cancer and a higher number of respondents constituting 45 per cent of the lot had no idea about it and hence chose cannot say as their answer.

Further, 53 per cent of the respondents had no idea if antibiotics can cure HPV infections. Also, 46 per cent of them said that HPV vaccination cannot cure all the sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Only 36 per cent of the respondents believed that providing vaccination to women who are not sexually active are likely to be more effective compared to those who get it later in life. Lastly, over 60 per cent of respondents were found to be aware of the ideal age to get vaccinated.

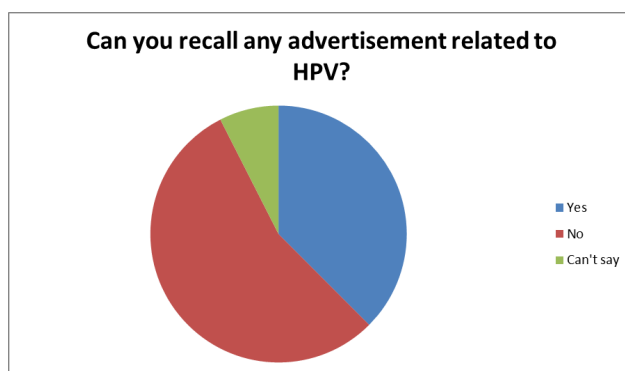
Evaluating the role of media in spreading awareness for HPV vaccination and cervical cancer

The role of media can be studied broadly under different categories, however to limit the area of study, the researchers have taken broadcast (television, radio, etc.), print (newspapers, magazines, etc.) and social media into consideration.

The findings of this survey reveal that the respondents came across HPV vaccination related content mostly on social media. Print and broadcast media was reported to propagate less content related to HPV or cervical cancer. Out of all the respondents, only 10 per cent reported to have seen content on each broadcast and print media about HPV.



When asked about advertisements related to HPV vaccination, 55 per cent respondents did not recall any ad that talked about HPV vaccination or cervical cancer.



6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer two major questions that encapsulated the level of awareness about HPV vaccination among young women in India and the factors that prevent these women from getting vaccinated. As reported in the findings above, the level of awareness was found to be significantly low. Many women had not even heard of the word HPV before coming to this survey. Most of them were unaware of the preventive behaviours, health hazards and severe threats that arise with HPV infections. Cervical cancer is only one among many conditions that are caused due to HPV but many individuals tend to use HPV interchangeably with cervical cancer. Literature available on health communication often talks about medicalization of certain social conditions but the results of this survey emphasize at the need to medically educate people about these major health concerns so that when they encounter any such term, they are not left bewildered and confused about what is being discussed.

Along with this as per the responses received, one of the major factors that stop women from getting vaccinated is the lack of awareness about the disease. High price and lack of availability are two other factors that inhibit the intake. Some women said that despite their awareness about increasing cases of cervical cancer and the need to take HPV vaccination, they have not been able to get it because it is not available in the nearby health centers and even if it is available the price of each dose is in thousands which is not affordable by everyone.

An incidence where actress Poonam Pandey faked her death on social media in order to bring attention to HPV vaccination seemed to have played a vital role among these women in increasing their awareness about the existence of HPV. This actress took to her social media handle and posted news about her death due to cervical cancer and after few days revealed that it was fake news only intended to aware people about the severity of cervical cancer. Many ethical considerations arose with this controversial stunt but ultimately this seemed to be successful in bringing attention to this particular cause.

Considering the threat of cervical cancer and HPV infections increasing rapidly, it's important to plan appropriate media strategy in order to increase awareness of women in India. Currently, some PSAs that are being run for HPV awareness do not seem to reach its target audience. The low level of awareness among the respondents of this study becomes even more significant when it is noted that these are well educated ladies mostly in their twenties working

across the country. If this is the status of educated women around us, we can barely imagine the level of negligence for HPV vaccination in illiterate section of India and among the marginalized communities. Lowering down the cost of vaccines and working on its supply can also foster women to get vaccinated and hence help India reduce its cases of cervical cancer on the global metrics.

7. LIMITATIONS

This study was confined to a small sample of 88 respondents due to temporal and geographical constraints but if similar kind of survey is carried out at the national level with a larger set of population, it will help government formulate better policies and hence aid in increasing the rate of vaccination in country.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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