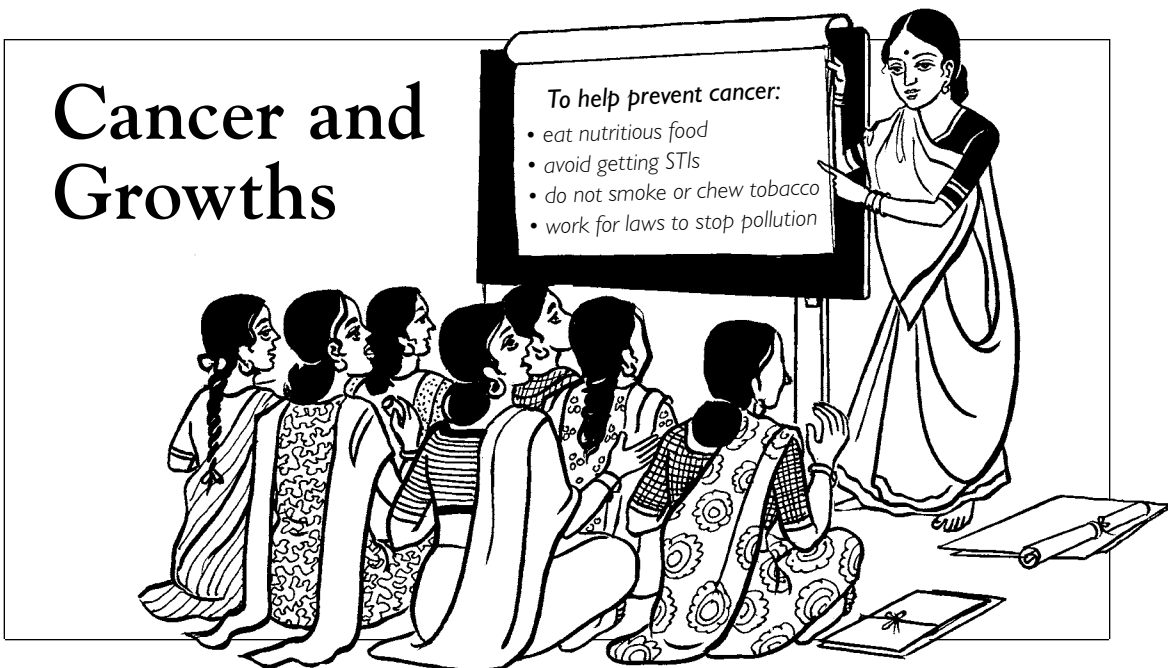


Chapter 24

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Cancer and Growths



Cancer is a serious sickness that can affect many parts of the body. If treated early it is often curable, but left too long it usually leads to death, because many places do not provide care for cancers. Early signs of cancer are often missed because:

- basic health care services do not include cancer screening.
- when women's health is not valued and they are busy caring for others, women with cancer often do not get health care until it is too late for treatment. See Mira's story on page 9.
- people may be afraid to talk about cancer, especially when they are treated badly by those with wrong ideas about what causes it. Cancer is not caused by magic spells or curses. Cancer is not a punishment for having done something wrong.

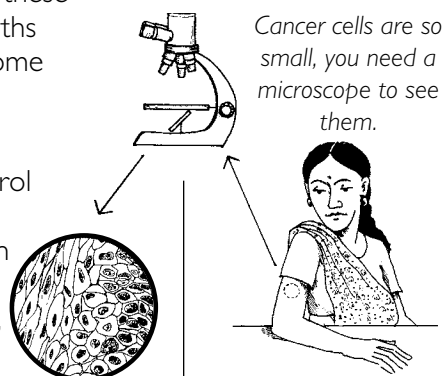
WHAT IS CANCER?

The human body, like all living things, is made up of tiny *cells* that are too small to see without a *microscope*. Sometimes these cells change and grow in abnormal ways, causing growths (tumors). Some growths go away on their own. But some get larger or spread and may cause health problems.

Most growths are not cancer, but some are.

Cancer starts when cells begin to grow out of control and take over parts of the body. Cancer that is found early can often be removed by surgery or treated with *chemotherapy* (medicines) or *radiation therapy*, with a good chance of it being cured. Once cancer spreads, however, stopping it is more difficult and eventually becomes impossible.

► “Tumor” is another word for a growth, lump or swelling. Some tumors are cancer and some are not.



Cancer

► *Cancer does not spread from person to person. You cannot get cancer by being near or caring for a person with cancer, eating with them, or washing their clothes.*



staying healthy

Cancers of the *cervix*, breast, and *womb* are very common cancers. Cancers of the *lung*, colon, *liver*, *stomach*, mouth, and skin are also common.

CAUSES OF CANCER

It may not be possible to know the direct cause of a person's cancer. But these things make people more likely to get cancer:

- smoking tobacco, which is known to cause lung cancer, and also increases the risk of getting most other cancers
- breathing smoke from tobacco or cookstoves, or vehicle exhaust
- certain viral infections, like *HIV*, *hepatitis B*, or certain types of *HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)*
- lack of nutritious food, including enough fruits and vegetables
- working with or living around many *chemicals* (especially pesticides, dyes, paints, and solvents)

Older people are more likely to get cancer than younger people. And a few types of cancer “run in families,” meaning you are more likely to get that cancer if your blood relatives have had it.

Healthy living conditions prevent many cancers. Eat *nutritious* food and avoid things that may cause cancer. For example:

- Do not smoke or chew tobacco.
- Avoid or limit drinking alcohol.
- Try to avoid harmful chemicals in your home or workplace, including foods grown or preserved with them.
- Help get laws passed to stop pollution.

CANCER TREATED EARLY CAN OFTEN BE CURED

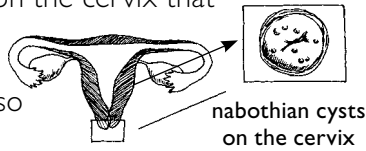
Finding cancer early can often save a woman's life, because she can get treatment before the cancer spreads. Some cancers have warning signs that show something may be wrong.

Cancers that do not have early signs can often be found with screening tests, which are tests given to healthy people to see if everything is normal. Pap tests and visual inspections are both screening tests for cancer of the cervix (see page 378). A mammogram is a screening test for early signs of breast cancer.

If you have warning signs or a test shows something may be wrong, do not wait. Follow the advice in this chapter for finding and treating the problem as soon as possible.

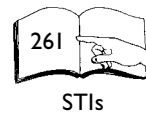
PROBLEMS OF THE CERVIX THAT ARE NOT CANCER (THE CERVIX IS THE OPENING OF THE WOMB)

Nabothian cysts are small bumps on the cervix that are filled with fluid. They can be seen during a *pelvic exam* with a *speculum*. These *cysts* are harmless, so no treatment is needed.



Polyyps are dark red growths, sometimes found at the cervix. They also grow inside the womb. They do not need to be treated. For more about them, see “Common Growths of the Womb,” page 380.

Inflammation of the cervix. Many infections of the vagina, including trichomonas and some other STIs, can affect the cervix and cause growths, sores, or irritation and bleeding after sex. For more information, including treatment, see the chapter on STIs.



CANCER OF THE CERVIX (CERVICAL CANCER)

Cancer of the cervix is the most common cause of death from cancer among women in many parts of the world. Most cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papilloma Virus, or HPV. There are many types of HPV and only a few of them can cause cervical cancer. (Another type of HPV causes genital warts.)

HPV is a common infection. Many people get it, and then it goes away without treatment. But HPV infections that do not go away can cause cancer. Because this cancer grows slowly, there is time to find it early and cure it completely. Unfortunately, many women die from cervical cancer because they never knew they had it. Now there is a vaccine that can prevent HPV (see page 379).



The best time to be screened for cervical cancer is around the age of 30, and every 3 to 5 years after that.

People with HIV are more likely to get cervical cancer because their immune systems are less able to fight the HPV. They should be screened for cervical cancer even if they are younger than 30. If the results are normal, then they should be tested every 3 years.

Warning signs:

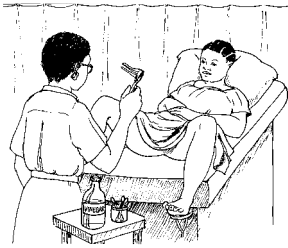
There are usually no outward signs of cancer of the cervix until it has spread and is more difficult to treat. Because early signs of cancer can be found on the cervix during a pelvic exam, regular exams are very important.

Later warning signs are *abnormal bleeding* from the vagina, including bleeding after sex, and persistent *abnormal discharge* or bad smell from the vagina. If you have any of these signs, try to get a pelvic exam and a screening test.

IMPORTANT

If you are treated with medicines for vaginal discharge and do not get better, have your cervix examined and get a cancer screening test.

► If you are a health worker, try to get training in testing for cervical cancer. Encourage your community to offer cancer screening and low-cost treatment (cryotherapy).



It is easy and inexpensive to test for cervical cancer.

Finding and treating cancer of the cervix

Because cancer of the cervix can be cured if found early but does not have early warning signs you can see, it is good to test for it regularly. Three screening tests look for early signs of cervical cancer. Each test is done during a pelvic exam and requires touching the cervix with a cotton swab or small brush.

Visual inspection with acetic acid

A health worker examines the cervix by looking at it through a speculum (see page 536). Then she puts vinegar (acetic acid) on a cotton swab and wipes it on the cervix. The acetic acid makes any abnormal tissue turn white. This test gives you the result right away and you can often receive treatment the same day. It is low cost and easy to learn how to do.

The Pap test

For this test, a health worker gently takes some cells from the cervix and sends them to a laboratory to be examined with a microscope. This test looks for abnormal cells that may be cancer or pre-cancer. You will need to return in 2 to 3 weeks to get the results.

HPV test

Like the Pap test, a health worker takes some cells from the cervix and sends them to a laboratory to be examined for HPV, a virus that increases risk for cervical cancer. You will need to return in 2 to 3 weeks to get the results. If the test is positive and shows you have HPV, you should get a Pap test or visual inspection to find out if you have abnormal cells and need treatment.

Other tests

These tests are sometimes used to find cancer when a Pap test or visual inspection shows abnormal cells.

- **Colposcopy.** A doctor uses a special lens to magnify the cervix so it is easier to see signs of cancer.
- **Biopsy.** A small bit of tissue is taken from the cervix and sent to a laboratory to be examined for cancer cells.

Regular testing for cancer of the cervix saves lives

To find cancer of the cervix early enough to treat it simply and successfully, anyone with a cervix should be tested every 3 to 5 years, starting at about age 30. Also:

- If you have a positive HPV test and a Pap test with no abnormal cells at the same exam, test for cancer again in 1 year.
- If a Pap test shows some abnormal cells, test for cancer again in 1 year.
- If you are treated to remove pre-cancer, test for cancer again in 1 year.

Treatment:

If a screening test shows that you have pre-cancer or cancer, you need treatment. Treatment for pre-cancer is simple, using methods that destroy the abnormal tissue. *Cryotherapy*, which can be done in a small clinic, freezes and kills the pre-cancer. Another method that can be done in a small clinic, thermal ablation, uses heat to kill the pre-cancer. Also, a simple surgery can remove the pre-cancer cells from the cervix.

If found and treated before it spreads, cancer can be cured. Treatment may involve removing part of the cervix, or you may need a hysterectomy (removal of the womb, including the cervix) to get rid of the cancer.

Cancer that has spread beyond the cervix to other parts of the body may need radiation therapy and medicines as well as surgery to remove the cervix, womb, and other parts that the cancer has reached.

Deaths from cancer of the cervix can be prevented

To find and treat more cancers early, we can:

- learn how common cancer of the cervix is in your community and what risk factors can be reduced. Are girls married or pushed to have sex at a young age? Do people know how to protect themselves and each other from STIs?
- help people avoid or quit smoking tobacco.
- learn about cancer screening and work to make it more available. Finding cancer of the cervix early can save lives.

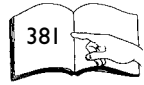
Developing screening programs may seem too costly but they are cheaper than treatment. Screening programs can help the most while costing the least if they:

- **test people over 35**, especially people who are middle-aged. Cancer of the cervix rarely affects the young.
- **test more people less often**. Testing everyone at risk every 5 to 10 years will find many more cancers than testing fewer people more often.
- **train local health workers** in how to do visual inspection, use cryotherapy or thermal ablation, and give Pap tests.

There is a “HPV vaccine” that now protects against cervical cancer and is used in many countries. It is given to girls and boys when they are 7 to 11 years old, before they start having sex. Ask to make it available in your community.



36
deciding about
treatment

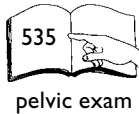


381
hysterectomy

► *Cancer is usually treated in a hospital or center specializing in cancer treatment.*



Problems of the Womb



pelvic exam

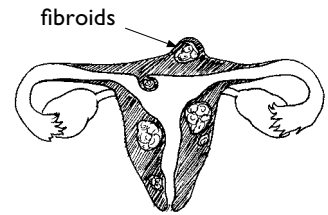


anemia

COMMON GROWTHS OF THE WOMB

Fibroid tumors

Fibroids are growths of the womb. They can cause abnormal bleeding from the vagina, pain in the lower belly, and repeated miscarriage (losing a pregnancy). They are almost never cancer.

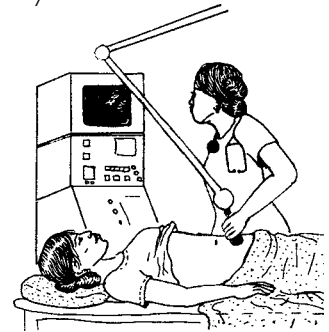


Signs:

- menstrual periods with heavy bleeding or bleeding at unusual times of the month
- pain or a heavy feeling in the lower belly
- deep pain during sex

Finding and treating fibroids

Fibroids are usually found during a pelvic exam. The womb will feel too large or be the wrong shape. A machine called an *ultrasound*, if it is available, can show how large the fibroids are.

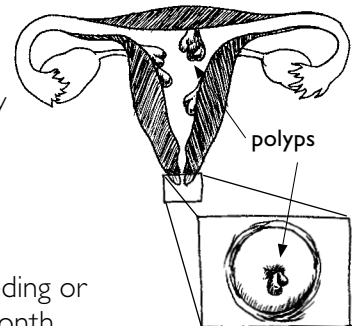


An ultrasound test.

If fibroids cause problems, they can be removed with surgery. Sometimes the whole womb is removed. But most of the time, surgery is not necessary because fibroids usually become smaller after menopause and stop causing problems. If fibroids are causing heavy menstrual bleeding, *anemia* may develop. Try to eat foods rich in iron.

Polyps

Polyps are dark red growths found inside the womb or at the cervix. They are rarely cancer.



Signs:

- bleeding after sex
- menstrual periods with heavy bleeding or bleeding at unusual times of the month

Finding and treating polyps

Polyps at the cervix can be seen and removed easily and painlessly during a pelvic exam by someone who has been trained. Polyps inside the womb may be removed if they are the likely cause of heavy bleeding. The growth is sent to a laboratory to make sure there is no cancer. Once polyps are removed, they usually do not grow back.

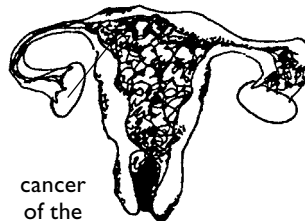
CANCER OF THE WOMB (ENDOMETRIAL CANCER, CANCER OF THE UTERUS)

Cancer of the womb usually starts in the lining inside the womb (the endometrium). If it is not treated, it can spread to the womb itself and to other parts of the body.

Cancer of the womb is more likely after menopause. Someone with womb cancer is more likely to have had illnesses, medical treatments, or a heavier body weight that affected their hormone levels. But usually there is no way to know what caused the cancer.

Signs:

- heavy menstrual bleeding
- irregular periods or bleeding at unusual times of the month
- bleeding after menopause



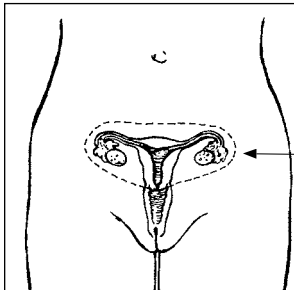
cancer
of the
womb



IMPORTANT *If you have finished menopause—meaning at least 12 months have passed without a period—pay attention to any bleeding from the vagina. If you have even light spotting, get checked by a health worker to make sure it is not a sign of cancer.*

Finding and treating cancer of the womb

To find out if someone has cancer of the womb, a trained health worker will take a sample (biopsy), often using a procedure called dilation and curettage (D&C). The sample of tissue will be sent to a laboratory to be checked for cancer. If cancer is found, it must be treated as soon as possible with an operation to remove the womb (hysterectomy). Radiation therapy may also be used.



Hysterectomy

In a hysterectomy, sometimes only the womb is removed and sometimes the tubes and ovaries are also removed. Since your ovaries make *hormones* that help protect you against heart disease and weak bones, it is always better to leave them in, if possible. Talk to a doctor about this.

If cancer of the womb is found early, it can be cured. If it is more advanced, curing it is more difficult.



abnormal bleeding, 359
heavy or irregular
menstrual bleeding, 129

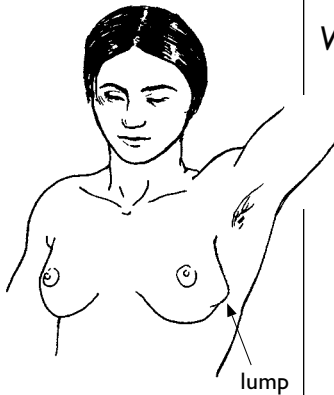
Problems of the Breasts



breast examination



breast infections



Breast lumps

It is common to find lumps in the breasts, especially soft, fluid-filled ones (called cysts). These usually change during the menstrual cycle, and sometimes feel sore or painful when pressed. Few breast lumps are cancer. But since breast cancer is always a possibility, try to examine your breasts for lumps once a month (see Warning signs below and on page 162).



Discharge from the nipple

Milky or clear discharge from one or both nipples can be normal if you have breastfed a baby within the last year. Brown, green, or bloody discharge—especially from only one nipple—could be a sign of cancer. Get checked by a health worker who can examine your breasts.

Breast infection

If you are breastfeeding a baby and get a hot, red, sore area on the breast, it probably is *mastitis*, or an abscess. This is not cancer and is easily cured. For someone who is not breastfeeding, it may be a sign of cancer.



CANCER OF THE BREAST

Breast cancer usually grows slowly. If it is found early, it can often be cured. As with other cancers, it is hard to tell who will get breast cancer. The risk might be greater if your mother or sisters have had breast cancer or for someone who has had cancer of the womb. Breast cancer is more common after age 50.

Warning signs:

- a hard painless lump with a jagged shape, that is in only one breast and does not move under the skin
- redness or a sore on the breast that does not heal
- skin on the breast that is pulled in, or looks rough and pitted, like orange or lemon peel
- a nipple that changes and becomes pulled inward
- abnormal discharge from a nipple
- a painless swelling under the arm that does not go away after 4 to 6 weeks

For any of these signs, see a trained health worker right away.

Finding and treating breast cancer

If you examine your breasts regularly, you are likely to notice if there are any changes or if a new lump develops. A special x-ray called a mammogram is used to find breast lumps when they are small and less noticeable. If a lump is found with a mammogram, usually more tests will be needed to find out if the lump is dangerous.

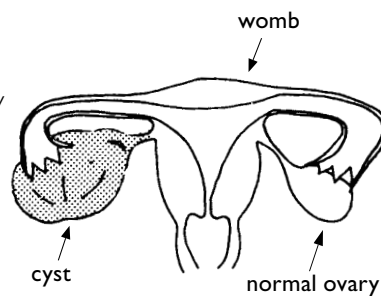
The only way to know for sure if someone has breast cancer is with a biopsy. For this, a surgeon removes all or part of the lump with a needle or a knife and has it tested for cancer in a laboratory.

Treatment depends on how advanced the cancer is and what is available where you live. If a lump is small and found early, just removing the lump may be effective. But for some cases of breast cancer, an operation may be needed to remove the whole breast. Sometimes doctors also use chemotherapy medicines and radiation therapy.

No one knows yet how to prevent breast cancer. But we do know that finding and treating breast cancer early makes a cure more likely. Sometimes after treatment it never comes back. Other times, it returns years later. It may come back in the other breast or, less often, in other parts of the body.

CYSTS ON THE OVARIES

These cysts are fluid-filled sacks that can grow on the ovaries. They happen only during the reproductive years, between *puberty* and *menopause*. A cyst can cause pain on one side of the lower *abdomen* and irregular menstrual periods. But most cysts are only found when a health worker feels one during a pelvic examination.



Most cysts last only a few months and go away on their own. But some can grow very large and must be removed by surgery. If you have severe pain, see a health worker right away.

CANCER OF THE OVARIES

Cancer of the ovaries is not common. There are usually no warning signs, but a health worker might feel an ovary that is very large while doing a pelvic examination. Surgery, medicines, and radiation therapy are all used for treatment, and cure is very difficult.



how to examine
your breasts

► See a health worker right away if you have already had breast cancer and find another lump in the breast or notice other warning signs of breast cancer (see page 382).

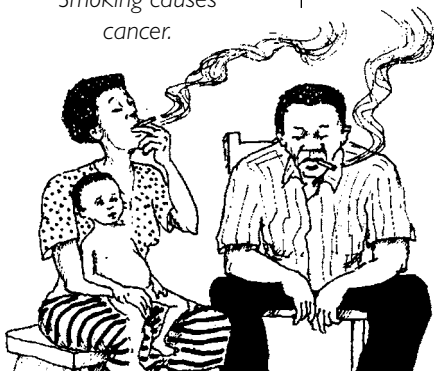
Problems of the Ovaries



severe pain in
the abdomen

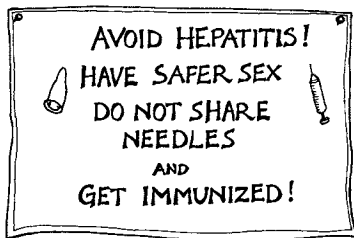
Other Common Cancers

Smoking causes cancer.

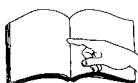


► The signs of lung cancer are the same as tuberculosis (TB). Seek medical help if you have these signs.

► Cancer of the liver can be caused by hepatitis B and C.



► Give hepatitis B vaccine to newborns and to adults who were not vaccinated as children.



STIs, 261
hepatitis B, 269

LUNG CANCER

Lung cancer is the most common cancer, and it is also the most preventable. It is caused usually by smoking tobacco. No matter how long you have smoked, quitting at any time lessens your chance of getting lung cancer. Cigarette smoking also causes other cancers. People living or working with someone who smokes can also be harmed, even if they do not smoke themselves. Lung cancer can also be caused by breathing other types of smoke, for example, smoke from vehicles, factories, and cooking fires.

Lung cancer does not usually affect people until they are over 40 years old. The signs (coughing up blood, losing weight, difficulty breathing) appear when the cancer is advanced and difficult to cure. Surgery to remove part of the lung, chemotherapy medicines, and radiation therapy are all used to treat lung cancer.

MOUTH AND THROAT CANCER

Mouth and throat cancer can be caused by smoking, chewing tobacco, and some types of human papilloma virus (HPV). If you have hoarseness, pain when swallowing, or a sore throat or sores in your mouth that do not heal, get medical advice.

CANCER OF THE LIVER

Some people who become infected with hepatitis B or C develop cancer of the liver years later. Signs of liver cancer are a swollen abdomen and general weakness. See a health worker if you think you may have liver cancer.

Hepatitis B and C can be prevented by having safer sex and not sharing needles. Also, there is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B. Babies can be vaccinated at birth. Adults can be vaccinated at any time.

CANCER OF THE STOMACH

Cancer of the stomach usually occurs after age 40. Usually there are no signs until it is advanced. Surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy medicines are all used as treatments.

Sometimes cancer of the stomach is caused by a bacteria (*H. pylori*). This bacteria can be treated with medicine, and the treatment can prevent cancer before it starts. The signs are similar to indigestion or heartburn. If you get these signs often, or for a long time, talk with a health worker about getting tested and treated.

Many cancers can be cured, but others cannot, especially if the cancer has spread to several parts of the body. Hospitals that treat cancer may be far away, in large cities, or where treatment is costly.

Sometimes, when cancer is found late and there is no cure, it may be best to stay at home in the care of your family. This time can be very difficult. Eat as well as you can and get enough rest. Medicines for pain, anxiety, and sleeping problems can make you more comfortable (see page 482). Talking with someone close to you can help you prepare for death, including planning for your family's future after you are gone.



When Cancer Cannot Be Cured

If you are caring for someone who must stay in bed or who is near death, see the information on the following pages: 142, 143, 306, 308, 309, and 372.

Many deaths could be avoided if more cancers were found and treated earlier and if people better understood causes of cancer and worked to prevent it. Communities can organize to:

- screen for more cancers in local and rural health services.
- train and equip local health workers to do visual inspection for cancer of the cervix, Pap tests, cryotherapy, and breast exams.
- educate people about the causes of cancer and how to lessen the chance of getting cancer. This includes how we live our lives as well as community efforts to reduce pollution and cancer-causing chemicals in our environment.
- set up support groups for people with cancer, to share experience, information and tips for managing illness and treatment.
- make testing and treatment for cancer available to all.

It is also important for everyone to:

- learn to examine their breasts for lumps or unusual signs.
- learn and help others learn about the warning signs of cancer.
- not be afraid of people with cancer. Treat them with kindness and compassion.

Working for Change