

Cervical cancer coverage:

A top priority of PhilHealth in Universal Health Care

The Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) provides coverage for cervical cancer screening through the Konsultasyong Sulit at Tama (Konsulta) primary care package and cervical cancer treatment through the Z Benefits. Since 2015, benefit claims for cervical cancer filed under the Z Benefits amount to P31 million.

"We are glad that your PhilHealth has been able to extend medical care benefits to those women suffering from this dreaded disease. Indeed, the state health insurer is always looking into the welfare of its members and always doing its best to provide financial risk protection whenever and wherever Filipinos need quality health care," Acting PhilHealth President and CEO Emmanuel R. Ledesma, Jr. said.

Each year in the Philippines, 7,897 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and 4,052 die from the disease. Cervical cancer ranks second in cancers among women in the Philippines and the second most common cancer in women between the ages of 15 and 44 (DOH, May 2023). Warning signs of cervical cancer show abnormal bleeding or foul-smelling vaginal discharge, bleeding after sexual intercourse, persistent back, leg, or pelvic pain, and unexplainable weight loss.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends screening for cervical cancer from 30 years of age in the general population of women or earlier for sexually active women. Further, updated guidelines of the WHO recommend Human Papillomavirus (HPV) tests for cervical cancer screening, which is more cost-effective than cytology (i.e., Pap smear). In addition, the WHO also recommends the primary target of vaccination against HPV, which is the first line of defense against cervical cancer, are girls aged 9-14. The secondary targets for HPV vaccination are boys and other females whenever feasible and affordable.

Meanwhile, in a recent report by Professor Dindo Manhit of Stratbase ADR Institute along with other Cancer Societies and Cancer-free Movement, their

groups discussed evidence-based and cost-effective interventions that will scale up the elimination of cervical cancer in the Philippines and to officially launch the Zero Cervical Cancer Movement.

PhilHealth acknowledges the groups' effort to bring down the incidence of cervical cancer if not totally eliminate this catastrophic illness through boosting immunization, vaccination and treatment control programs and fully support their future projects in collaboration with other sectors. Furthermore, in response to their call to expand coverage of the Z benefits package for cervical cancer and even include HPV Screening in the soon-to-be introduced Konsulta Plus Package, the PhilHealth Chief has this to say. *"We are determined to further enhance our benefits package to provide responsive coverage for our members and their dependents needing treatment. Cancer screening will be included under Konsulta primary care package while the Z Benefits covers treatment for this type of cancer. This year, enhancement in select Z Benefits packages will include cervical cancer,"* he added.

Currently, PhilHealth has two Z Benefits packages that cover complete course of treatment for cervical cancer for stages IA1, IA2-IIA1 where it pays P120,000 for Chemoradiation with Cobalt and Brachytherapy (low dose) and P175,000 for Chemoradiation with Linear Accelerator and Brachytherapy (high dose).

Ledesma also stressed the importance of more healthcare providers being contracted for PhilHealth's Z Benefits Package for cervical cancer to ensure greater access to patients. *"To date there are seven (7) contracted hospitals where qualified patients can avail of the Z Benefits package for cervical cancer. PhilHealth is committed to engaging more healthcare providers to partner with us to make this more accessible to members and their dependents who are afflicted with the disease,"* he explained. ###

