

Human Papillomavirus Vaccine: What You Should Know

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus is a common virus that infects the skin, particularly the genital area. There are over 100 types of HPV and about 40 of them are spread through sexual contact. HPV types can be broadly grouped into two categories, those that might lead to cancer and those that do not lead to cancer.

How common is HPV in the United States?

HPV infections are very common. Right now about 20 million people in the U.S. have HPV and over 6 million more are newly infected each year – mostly people in their late teens and early 20s. Many people get infected with more than one type of HPV.

What are the symptoms?

Most of the time there are no symptoms and most HPV infections go away on their own.

Some HPV types will cause an ongoing (chronic) infection in the cervix of a woman. This causes abnormal Pap smears. Chronic HPV infection can lead to cervical cancer. The only way to know if you have a chronic infection is by having regular Pap smears. HPV can also cause other types of cancer including cancer of the penis, vulva, or anus.

Other types of HPV causes genital warts, which can be uncomfortable and irritating and can reoccur but do not cause cervical cancer. Genital warts can infect a baby's lungs and airway during birth.

How common is cervical cancer?

Yearly Pap smears have been highly successful in reducing cervical cancer in the United States. However, about 12,000 cases of cervical cancer occur as the result of chronic HPV infection, and about 3,700 women die of cervical cancer in the U.S. each year. In Minnesota, about 175 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year and about 45 die.

How do you prevent HPV infections?

Not having sex is the surest way to prevent HPV infections. Reducing the number of sexual partners and using condoms will reduce the risk of getting an HPV infection, but may not entirely prevent infection.

There is an HPV vaccine that protects against the HPV types that cause about 70 percent of cervical cancer and about 90 percent of genital warts. The HPV vaccine will prevent HPV infection for two types of HPV that might lead to cancer. To get this protection, you need a series of three HPV shots, given in the arm.

HPV vaccination plus yearly Pap smears are the best way to prevent cervical cancer.

Does the HPV vaccine work?

Yes, it is very good at protecting young women against the most common types of HPV that cause cervical cancer and genital warts. But the vaccine does not protect against every type of HPV, and it does not help treat a person who already has an HPV infection. Therefore, women and girls who get vaccinated are still at risk for genital warts and cervical cancer.



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With the vaccine are Pap smears still necessary?

Yes. It is still extremely important for all women to get regular Pap smears – even after they get an HPV vaccination. Pap smears save lives. The vaccine only protects against two types of HPV that cause cancer. Pap smears detect infections from other HPV types.

Is the HPV vaccine safe?

The vaccine was tested in thousands of women and serious reactions were very rare. The most common complaint was that the vaccine stings. Some women also had soreness and swelling in the arm where the shot was given.

Who should get the HPV vaccine?

National groups, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, recommend that young girls get HPV vaccine as part of their preteen healthcare visit at age 11-12 years. The vaccine provides the best protection if given before a woman is sexually active. The vaccine can be given as young as 9 years old. It's also recommended for females ages 13 through 26 years who haven't yet been vaccinated.

Can males get the vaccine?

It is not licensed for males at this time. However, scientists are studying whether the vaccine works in males and making sure that it is safe to give to them.

Can I get free or low cost HPV shots?

Yes, if you don't have insurance or your insurance does not cover the cost of HPV vaccination, you may be able to find free or low cost HPV shots.

- Talk to your healthcare provider. If the person in need of vaccination is 18 years old or younger, they may be eligible for the Minnesota Vaccines for Children program. This program covers the cost of vaccination; however, the parent may have

to pay an administration fee of up to \$14.69 per shot.

- Merck, the company that makes the vaccine, has a program for women ages 19-26 years who need HPV vaccination but cannot afford it. Call them at 1-800-261-5579 or go to their website at www.merckvaccines.com and click on Adult Immunization Program.
- Talk to your city or county health department. They may be able to provide low cost HPV shots.

Where can I find more information about HPV?

- Minnesota Department of Health: www.health.state.mn.us/immunize (click on Diseases Prevented by Vaccines in the left column, then on HPV)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/default.htm and click on Human Papillomavirus
- Immunization Action Coalition: www.immunize.org/HPV/
- Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia: vaccine.chop.edu