

PREVENTION OF CERVICAL CANCER (HPV VACCINE)



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What is HPV ?

HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) is a common virus that is passed from one person to another through direct skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. Most sexually active people will get HPV at some time in their lives, though most will never even know it. HPV infection is most common in people in their late teens and early 20s.

There are many strains (types) of HPV that can infect the genital areas of men and women. Most HPV types cause no symptoms and go away on their own. But some types can cause cervical cancer in women and other less common cancers such as cancers of the anus, penis, vagina, vulva (area around the opening of the vagina) and oropharynx (back of throat including base of tongue and tonsils). Other types of HPV can cause warts in the genital areas of men and women. These genital warts are not life-threatening. However, they can cause emotional stress and the treatment can be very uncomfortable.

Why are HPV vaccines important ?

The vaccines target the HPV types that most commonly cause cervical cancer. One of the two currently available vaccines also protects against genital warts caused by HPV. Both vaccines are highly effective in preventing specific HPV types.

What is the vaccination schedule ?

The schedule is two to three doses of intramuscular injections, administered over a period of six months; 2 doses for those aged 9-14 and 3 doses for those aged >15 years.

Who needs to get vaccinated ?

HPV vaccination is recommended for girls and women (9 to 26 years of age). Although safe, vaccines are not recommended after the age of 26 because they may not provide much, if any, benefit.

Can pregnant women take the vaccine ?

The vaccines are not recommended for administration to pregnant women. Although studies show that HPV vaccines do not cause problems for babies born to women who received HPV vaccination when pregnant, more research is still needed. If the patient becomes pregnant in the middle of the vaccine series, then the doses should be completed after delivery. Vaccination can be given during breastfeeding.

Should girls and women be screened for cervical cancer before getting vaccinated?

Girls and women do not need to get a HPV test or Pap test to find out if they should get the vaccine. However it is important that women continue to be screened for cervical cancer, even after getting all three shots of the HPV vaccine.

How effective is the vaccination?

It is a prophylactic vaccine. As with any vaccine, a protective immune response may not be elicited in all cases. The vaccines are less effective in preventing HPV-related disease in young women who have already been exposed to one or more HPV types. This is because the vaccines can prevent HPV only before a person is exposed to it. HPV vaccines do not treat existing HPV infections or HPV-associated diseases.

How long does vaccine protection last?

There has been no evidence of waning immunity ten years after vaccination. Studies are ongoing to determine the exact duration of vaccine protection. Booster doses are currently not recommended.

Do the vaccines protect against all HPV types?

The vaccines do not protect against all HPV types. They are ineffective in about 30% of cervical cancers. It is important, therefore, for women to continue regular screening (Pap tests) for cervical cancer.

How safe is the vaccine?

Both vaccines have been licensed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and approved by Centre for Disease Control (CDC) as safe and effective. Common mild adverse events reported during these studies include pain at the injection site, fever, dizziness and nausea.

In what other ways can I prevent cervical cancer?

Regular cervical cancer screening and follow-up can prevent most cases of cervical cancer. The Pap test can detect cell changes in the cervix before they turn into cancer. Pap tests can also detect most, but not all, cervical cancers at an early treatable stage. There are HPV tests, which may be used with the Pap test in certain cases, to help determine the next step in cervical cancer screening. Use of condoms and limiting the number of sexual partners may lower the chances of getting HPV infection.