

Questions & Answers

for Parents of Pre-teens and Teens about Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and the HPV Vaccine



What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a common virus that is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. Most of the time HPV has no symptoms so people do not know they have it. There are many different strains or types of HPV. Some types can cause cervical cancer in women and can also cause other less common kinds of cancer in both men and women. Other types of HPV can cause genital warts in both women and men.

In most people, HPV goes away on its own without any treatment and does not cause health problems. Experts do not know why HPV goes away in some cases, but not in others.

How common is HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States, with about 20 million people currently infected. Each year in the U.S., about 6.2 million people get a new HPV infection. HPV is most common in young people who are in their late teens and early 20s.

How common is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a serious health problem in the United States. Each year about 12,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and about 4,000 women die from it in the U.S.

What HPV vaccines are available?

There are two vaccines that prevent the types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer. These vaccines are Cervarix (made by GlaxoSmithKline) and Gardasil (made by Merck). One of the vaccines (Gardasil) also protects against the HPV types that cause most genital warts in females and males. Both vaccines are given in 3 shots over 6 months.

Who should get HPV vaccines?

Vaccination with either brand of HPV vaccine is routinely recommended for 11 and 12 year old girls. It is also recommended for girls and women age 13 through 26 who have not yet been vaccinated or completed the vaccine series.

One of the HPV vaccines, Gardasil, is also licensed, safe, and effective for males ages 9 through 26 years. Boys and young men may choose to get this vaccine to prevent genital warts.

If your pre-teen was not vaccinated against HPV at ages 11 or 12, the vaccines can be given later in the teen years. But studies show that 11 through 12 years is the ideal age to get maximum protection from HPV vaccines.

Pre-teens should get vaccinated before their first sexual contact (i.e., when they could be exposed to HPV). This is because the vaccine prevents disease in people who have not previously gotten one or more HPV types. It does not work as well for those who were exposed to the virus before getting the vaccine.

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For more information on vaccines, ask your child's healthcare provider or call **800-CDC-INFO** (800-232-4636)
Website: www.cdc.gov/vaccines/preteen/



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Are the HPV vaccines safe and effective?

Before any vaccine is licensed and made available to the American public, it must be extensively studied and the FDA must approve it as safe and effective. Once FDA approval is granted, CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices reviews the available data before deciding whether to recommend vaccines and for what populations. Both HPV vaccines have been widely studied and found to be safe and effective. These studies have shown no serious side effects. The most common side effect is soreness where the shot is given (in the arm).

The HPV vaccines will not treat existing diseases or conditions caused by HPV.

Is there another way to prevent HPV besides the vaccine?

The surest way to prevent genital HPV is to avoid sexual contact. For persons who are sexually active, condoms may lower your chances of getting HPV, genital warts, and cervical cancer— if used with every sex act, from start to finish. But HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom—so condoms may not fully protect against HPV.

What if someone has only had one or two doses of an HPV vaccine?

HPV vaccination is a series of three shots— so everyone getting an HPV vaccine should receive all three doses. HPV vaccine provides the most protection when all three doses are given before sexual activity begins.

Will the girls/women who have been vaccinated still need a Pap test, also called “cervical cancer screening”?

Girls/women will still need to see their healthcare provider for a regular Pap test. This is because the vaccine will not provide protection against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer, so women will still be at risk for some cancers. Regular Pap tests are recommended for all women starting within 3 years of becoming sexually active or at age 21, whichever comes first.

Why are HPV vaccines only recommended for girls/women 9 through 26 years old?

The vaccine has been widely tested in 9 through 26 year old females and males. Research is underway in women older than age 26 years. These vaccines may one day become available to women older than 26 years, if they are found to be safe and effective for them.

One brand of HPV vaccine, Gardasil, is licensed, safe and effective for males ages 9 through 26 years. Boys and young men may choose to get this vaccine to prevent genital warts. CDC did not add this vaccine to the recommended immunization schedule for boys because studies suggest that the best way to prevent the most disease due to HPV is to vaccinate as many girls as possible. Parents of pre-teen boys can decide if Gardasil is right for their sons by talking with their sons' healthcare providers.

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