



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists
WOMEN'S HEALTH CARE PHYSICIANS

Frequently Asked Questions for Patients Concerning HPV Vaccination

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common viral infection that has potentially serious consequences such as genital warts and cervical, vaginal, vulvar, penile, anal, mouth, and throat cancer. Approximately 79 million people in the United States have been infected with HPV and 14 million new infections occur every year, which leads to approximately 12,000 cases of cervical cancer per year with more than 4,000 deaths. An individual gets HPV from another person during sexual activity. Human papillomavirus is so common that 80% of those who are sexually active will contract HPV during their lifetime.

Will I know if I have HPV?

Most people with HPV will not know that they have an HPV infection. Genital warts are a sign of HPV infection. However, an infection of the cervix usually has no symptoms. With or without symptoms, an infected person can spread HPV to others.

How long do HPV infections last?

The immune system fights most HPV infections and clears them from the body in a few years. Infections that are not cleared from the body are called “persistent infections.” They may cause precancerous cells and cancer.

Do all women with HPV infections get cervical cancer?

No. In most women, HPV infections are cleared from the body in a few years. For women with persistent infections, regular screening is done with Pap tests. The Pap test looks for cells in the cervix that could be precancerous. This early detection and treatment of precancerous cells can prevent deaths due to cervical cancer.

Can HPV be prevented?

Yes. Several types of HPV can be prevented by vaccination.

What HPV vaccines are currently available?

There are three types of HPV vaccines. All three vaccines are effective in protecting against the two HPV types (16 and 18) that most commonly cause cancer and precancer. Talk to your obstetrician–gynecologist or other gynecologic care provider about the HPV vaccine for you or your child today.

Who should be vaccinated?

The ideal age for HPV vaccination is 11 years or 12 years in girls and boys. However, the vaccines can be given to children as young as age 9 years. Boys and girls who did not get vaccinated at age 11 years or 12 years can be vaccinated up to age 26 years. The HPV vaccine is not just for girls; boys can stop the spread of HPV by getting vaccinated too. Each year, 9,300 men receive a diagnosis of an HPV-related cancer. Males who receive the HPV vaccine are not only protecting their sexual partners, but also themselves.

(see reverse)

Why is HPV vaccination recommended at such young ages?

The HPV vaccines prevent infection but cannot treat infection. They work best if given before any exposure to HPV infection, which occurs with sexual activity. It is best to get the vaccine at your or your child's health care visit (at age 11–12 years). Compared with older adolescents and young adults, children between the ages of 11 years and 12 years develop a twofold to threefold higher level of the protective antibody that the body generates after immunization. This may result in longer-lasting immunity; however, sexually active individuals still may benefit from vaccination because they are unlikely to have been infected with all HPV types that are prevented by the vaccines.

What is the recommended timing of the three HPV vaccine doses?

Each of the three types of HPV vaccine are given as shots in the arm in three doses over 6 months.

If I am late for my second or third dose, do I have to start over with all three doses?

No. Starting over is not necessary. Get the next dose, whether it is the second or the third. Complete all three doses, even if the time between doses is longer than recommended.

Can women older than 26 years be vaccinated against HPV?

At this time, HPV vaccination is only recommended for individuals aged 9–26 years. The vaccines work best if given before exposure to HPV through sexual activity. Vaccination does not appear to be harmful if given after age 26 years, but it may not be as effective. Many women older than 26 years may already have been exposed to HPV.

Will vaccinating my daughter against HPV encourage her to become sexually active sooner?

No. Studies show that HPV vaccination has not been linked to girls having an earlier start to sexual activity or more sexual activity.

Are the HPV vaccines safe?

Yes. Studies show that all three vaccines are very safe and effective. They do not contain live viruses, so they cannot cause an HPV infection. The vaccines have been given to millions of people around the world without serious adverse effects. In the 8 years since the first vaccine was licensed, 0.0003% of patients reported adverse effects, and most of those were nonserious symptoms such as headache, nausea, and dizziness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continues to closely monitor the vaccine and its safety.

Do the HPV vaccines work?

Yes. The vaccines are highly effective at preventing cancer and other HPV-associated diseases when administered before sexual activity begins. The HPV vaccine can reduce your son or daughter's risk of certain HPV-related cancer by up to 99% when he or she is fully protected with three doses. Clinical trials and ongoing research have shown that the HPV vaccine's protection remains strong for at least 8–10 years. There is no evidence to suggest this level of protection changes over time. Two of the vaccines also can reduce the risk of getting genital warts by 90%.

RESOURCES

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
Immunization for Women
www.immunizationforwomen.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
HPV Vaccine—Questions and Answers
<http://www.cdc.gov/hpv/parents/questions-answers.html>