

What You Should Know About the HPV Vaccine That Protects Against Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is an infection that affects sexually active teens and adults. Over 20 million people in the U.S. have been infected with HPV, and 6 million more are infected each year, making it the most common sexually transmitted infection. Half of those who are newly infected are between the ages of 15 and 24 years of age. Eighty percent (80%) of sexually active women will develop the infection by the time they are 50 years of age.

The virus attacks the skin and mucus membranes, and it is spread through sexual and skin-to-skin contact. People infected with HPV don't have any symptoms – that's one of the reasons it's so commonly spread – and the infection can be present for many years before it is detected. Most infections go away on their own, but some strains can lead to genital warts, cervical cancer, and less frequently vaginal, anal, and penile cancer and cancer of the mouth and throat. There is no treatment for HPV infection itself; however, the conditions that it causes can be treated.

While HPV affects both men and women, women can suffer the most serious consequences, because the virus can cause changes in the cervix that lead to cancer. Annual pap tests usually identify pre-cancerous lesions before they develop into cancer, and surgical treatments can prevent the cancer from developing. Even so, the surgical removal of pre-cancerous cells can be painful and expensive, and 4,000 American women still die from cervical cancer every year.

There are over 30 different strains of HPV that cause sexually transmitted diseases. Four of them are responsible for 90% of genital warts and 70% of cervical cancer. Recently a vaccine was developed which protects against those four strains. This new HPV vaccine is 100% effective in preventing the cervical cancer that is caused by the 4 strains if the vaccine is given before infection occurs. Because it is recommended that girls receive the vaccine before they become sexually active, it is licensed for girls 9 through 26 years of age. It is currently being tested for use in women older than 26, as well as in males. The vaccine requires three doses that are completed over six months before it is most effective.

In Summary:

- In order for the vaccine to be **most** effective, it should be given before sexual activity has begun.
- The vaccine **should** still be given to women who are already infected with HPV, because it could offer protection against other vaccine strains they have not been exposed to yet.
- The vaccine is not effective against existing disease or against infection from HPV strains not covered by the vaccine.
- Females should continue to receive routine pap tests, because they could still become infected with other HPV strains not covered in the vaccine.
- Safe sex practices should still be used after HPV vaccination to prevent infection from HPV viruses not in the vaccine and from other sexually transmitted diseases.