

# Frequently Asked Questions about the HPV Vaccine



Genital human papillomavirus (HPV) is passed from person to person during sexual contact. This includes intimate sexual contact, but not necessarily intercourse. It is the most common sexually transmitted virus in the United States. About 20 million people in the U.S. have it, with 6.2 million new infections each year.

There are many kinds of HPV. Most HPV infections do not have obvious symptoms or signs. Often, the body will fight off this virus on its own, like a cold virus. Some types of HPV can cause genital warts. Other types can lead to changes that could turn into cancer in a woman's cervix (mouth of the womb) if they are not detected and treated.

Vaccines have been approved for the types of HPV that cause these harmful changes to the cervix, as well as some types of genital warts. Kaiser Permanente recommends an HPV vaccine for all girls 11 to 18 years old. Young women age 19 to 26 also may consider getting the vaccine.

## Why is the vaccine given only to girls and young women?

Studies have been done with girls because of the link between some types of HPV and cervical cancer. (Men do not have cervixes.) Studies on how the vaccine affects men are going on now.

## Why is the vaccine given to girls between ages 11 and 18?

Because of several things:

- We want to prevent the types of HPV that are linked to some types of genital warts and harmful changes to the cervix.
- The vaccine works best before girls first have sex. Being exposed to HPV is very common. It happens soon after girls start sexual activity.
- Pre-teens are most likely to receive all their shots (vaccinations) at well check visits. As young adults, they sometimes see their doctor or nurse practitioner less often. Also, younger girls respond better to vaccinations than older women.

## If a young woman is already sexually active can she still get the vaccine?

The vaccine works best for girls or young women who have not yet had sex. If they have been sexually active (including intimate contact but not necessarily intercourse), the vaccine becomes less and less effective. This happens because they have probably been exposed to HPV. This is especially likely if they have had more than one partner.

Since HPV is so common, and the body fights off most HPV infections, having the vaccine after being exposed to HPV is usually

not helpful. It would be like giving the chicken pox vaccine after the person already had the chicken pox—having chicken pox means your body already recognizes the virus and does not need immunization against it. Young women 19 to 26 should talk with their health care provider to see if the vaccine might be right for them. The vaccine is not approved for women older than 26.

### Does the HPV vaccine protect against other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

No, the HPV vaccine only works against some types of HPV. Everyone having sex needs to protect themselves against other STDs, HIV/AIDS, and unplanned pregnancies by using latex or polyurethane condoms and regular birth control methods.

### Does the vaccine cure cervical cancer?

No, it does not cure or treat cancer or precancer of the cervix. Studies show that it prevents some of the harmful changes that can lead to cervical cancer.

### Does the HPV vaccine ensure that cervical cancer will never develop?

No. The vaccine does not protect against all kinds of HPV. Also, the immunity from the vaccines may wear off over time. So it is very important that women continue to receive routine cervical cancer screening. This includes PAP tests and HPV screening for women starting at age 30.

### What about PAP tests?

Regular PAP tests are very important in preventing cervical cancer. The first PAP test should happen 3 years after sexual activity begins, or age 21, whichever comes first. If the results are normal, screening should be continued every 2 years until age 30. After age 30, women can safely wait 3 years between tests if their PAP and HPV tests are both normal.

### If I've had genital warts will I develop cervical cancer?

No. Genital warts are caused by different types of HPV than those that cause cancer. HPV and genital warts are very common. In most cases, HPV is harmless and cleared by the body naturally. Doctors can sometimes remove genital warts with

a small surgical procedure. Doctors do this by laser, by freezing them, or by applying topical medications. Ask your doctor for more information.

### How is the vaccine given?

The vaccine is given as three injections over six months. The most common side effects include local arm pain, swelling and redness at the injection site. It is important to have all three injections to get full protection from cervical cancer.

#### Additional resources

- CDC resource: [cdc.gov/nip/vaccine/hpv/hpv-faqs.htm](http://cdc.gov/nip/vaccine/hpv/hpv-faqs.htm)
- For more information on HPV or cervical cancer, connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org). Access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, message boards, healthclasses, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.