

What is HPV and why is it so important?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common viral infection that can cause skin warts and affect the genital tract in men and women. There are many types of HPV. Some affect the female genital tract causing lesions on the vulva, vagina, and/or cervix. HPV types can be divided into two groups:

- Low-risk types may cause genital warts and minor changes in the cervix
- High-risk types can cause precancerous changes and cervical cancer

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HPV infection is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the United States. Approximately 20 million Americans are currently infected.

What is the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine is a series of three shots over a six-month period; protection lasts at least four years. Scientists have not determined whether or not booster shots will be needed for longer protection.

Vaccine side effects are generally few and mild.

Who should get the vaccine?

The CDC and the American Cancer Society (ACS) recommend that all girls ages 11 – 12 get the HPV vaccine. However, girls as young as 9 can get the vaccine. The vaccine is also recommended for girls/women age 12 – 26 who have not yet received or completed the vaccine series (CDC, 2006).

Why is the HPV vaccine recommended for such young girls?

The CDC recommends that all females get the vaccine before they are sexually active. This is because the vaccine is most effective in girls/women who have not yet acquired any of the four HPV types covered by the vaccine. Girls/women who have not been infected will get the full benefits of the vaccine.

Safety of the HPV vaccine

The vaccine was tested in thousands of women and serious reactions were very rare. The most common complaint was that the vaccine stung. Some women also had soreness and swelling in the arm where the shot was given (Minnesota Department of Health, 2008).

How much does the vaccine cost?

Most health insurers cover the cost of the HPV vaccine. However, you should ask if you will have a copay or deductible cost before you get the vaccine. You may also be able to find free or low-cost HPV shots. Please talk with your provider or your local city or county health department.

Where can I get the vaccine?

You can get the HPV vaccine from your

- family doctor;
- gynecologist;
- pediatrician; or
- nurse practitioner.

Please contact your health care provider for further information.

Additional HPV Internet resources

American Cancer Society:

www.cancer.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

www.cdc.gov

Minnesota Department of Health:

www.health.state.mn.us/immunize

National Cervical Cancer Campaign:

www.nccc-online.org