NSW Health

Human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine

Parent Information Sheet

The Australian Government makes some vaccines for teenagers free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP).

Q. What is HPV, and how is it spread?

HPV (human papillomavirus) is a common virus that affects men and women. It spreads through genital contact during sex with someone who has the virus. The virus enters through tiny breaks in the skin and does not spread through blood or other body fluids. Condoms give limited protection because they don't cover all the genital skin.

Not all HPV types cause symptoms. Many people with HPV do not know they have it.

Some HPV types cause warts on the body, including the genitals (vulva, vagina, cervix, penis, scrotum, anus, and perineum). Warts are usually painless but may itch or feel uncomfortable. These types are called "low-risk" because they do not cause cancer.

Other HPV types, called "high-risk," can cause abnormal cells to grow. These cells can turn into cancer if not treated.

High-risk HPV causes:

- almost all cervical cancers
- 90% of anal cancers
- 78% of vaginal cancers
- 60% of throat cancers
- 25% of vulva cancers
- 50% of penile cancers.

Vaccinating males prevents cancers and warts in males and helps protect females from cervical cancer.

Q. How do vaccines work?

Vaccines help your immune system fight infections. If a vaccinated person gets exposed to these infections, their immune system can fight it better, either preventing the disease developing or making it less severe.

Q. Which vaccine will be used?

The HPV vaccine protects against 9 types of HPV: 6, 11, 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52, and 58.

Q. How many doses of the HPV vaccine are needed?

Research shows one dose of the HPV vaccine gives the same protection as two doses. Based on this, Australia now uses a one-dose schedule.

Some adolescents with weak immune systems need three doses. They should get the second dose 2 months after the first, and the third dose 4 months after the second.

People with weak immune systems include those with:

- immune system disorders
- HIV
- cancer
- organ transplants
- autoimmune diseases
- strong immunosuppressive therapy (but not spleen issues).

Q. What if my child already had one dose?

If your child already had one dose, they do not need a second. They are fully vaccinated.

Vaccinated women still need regular cervical screening (formerly Pap smears). The HPV vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV. Women aged 25+ should have a Cervical Screening Test every 5 years, even if vaccinated.

Q. Who should get the HPV vaccine?

All Year 7 students or children 12 years and older should get one dose of the HPV vaccine.

Q. Who should not get the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine should not be given to people who:

- are pregnant or think they might be pregnant
- had a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a previous HPV vaccine or its ingredients
- are allergic to yeast.

Q. How effective is the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine protects against high-risk HPV types that cause over 90% of cervical cancers in women. It also protects against other HPV types that cause cancers in men.

Studies show the vaccine offers nearly 100% protection even 10+ years after vaccination. Since the vaccine program started, there have been:

- 50% fewer high-grade cervical abnormalities in vaccinated age groups
- 90% fewer cases of genital warts in young people under 21.

Cervical cancer develops over 10+ years, so the vaccine's full effect on cervical cancer rates will take time to show. The rate of cervical cancer has already dropped significantly due to the National Cervical Screening Program (started in 1991) and the HPV vaccine program (started in 2007).

Q. What is in the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine contains yeast, aluminium adjuvant, sodium chloride, L-histidine, polysorbate, and sodium borate. These are included in tiny amounts to help the vaccine work or preserve it.

Q. How safe are vaccines?

Vaccines used in Australia are safe. They must pass strict safety tests before approval by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA also monitors vaccine safety after use.

Q. What are the side effects of the HPV vaccine?

Side effects are commonly mild, such as pain, swelling, or redness where the shot was given. These usually go away in a few days. Serious side effects are very rare.

For more information about side effects, check the Consumer Medicines Information (CMI) at health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination.

If you are worried about side effects, contact your GP. They can also report side effects to the local public health unit.

Q. What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is a severe allergic reaction that can cause unconsciousness or death if not treated quickly. It is very rare after vaccination. Vaccine providers are trained to treat anaphylaxis if it happens.