

PREVENTING HPV

Vaccinations reduce risk of cervical cancer in girls and women

Q: My daughter is in Grade 5 and her school nurse sent home a note that said she could receive a vaccine for HPV this year. Should she have it?

A: Yes, it is a good idea because the vaccine can help prevent your daughter from getting cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer). This vaccine is licensed in Canada for girls and women from nine to 26 years of age. Alberta Health and Wellness has added HPV vaccine to the routine vaccination schedule for girls in Grade 5, beginning in the 2008-2009 school year. Grade 9 girls will be offered, free of charge, HPV vaccine beginning in the 2009-2010 school year. The free vaccine will only be available for three years.

Q: What is HPV?

A: HPV or human papillomavirus is a group of more than 100 types of viruses, about 40 of which can cause cervical cancer and genital warts. It is spread easily through skin to skin contact during oral, vaginal, and anal sexual activity. Each year in Alberta, about 180 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and about 40 women die of the disease. Studies have shown that over 99 percent of cervical cancers are caused by HPV infection.

Q: Does the vaccine work? I have heard it does not protect from all types of HPV, so is it still worth having?

A: Yes, HPV vaccine works very well. It gives close to 100 percent protection against four types of HPV. Two of these HPV types cause about 70 percent of cervical cancers and the other two types cause 90 percent of genital warts. The vaccine has the best protection when it is given to girls before they become sexually active, before they have been exposed to the virus. Studies have shown that there is good protection against HPV for at least five years after vaccination with three doses of vaccine. More studies are being done to find out if booster shots are needed after five years. Since the HPV vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV, girls can still get types of HPV not included in the vaccine. So even if girls are vaccinated, it is still important for them to have regular Pap tests.

Q: How can HPV be prevented?

A: There is no treatment for HPV infection. The best protection is for girls to be vaccinated before they become sexually active. The vaccine does not cure existing HPV infection. Condoms do not give full protection against HPV, but do decrease the risk. Even women who do not have sex often are at risk of HPV infection because the virus is so common.

Q: What happens with HPV infection?

A: Most people infected with HPV do not have any symptoms. This is why HPV can be passed on to others without knowing it. The infection usually goes away by itself within one or two years with no treatment. Sometimes the infection may last longer, and for some women, the infection never goes away. Infections lasting a long time may cause changes in the cervix that can lead to cervical cancer.

Q: I have read there are risks. Is the vaccine safe? What reactions should I worry about?

A: Yes, the vaccine is safe. About 20 million girls around the world have already had the vaccine with very few serious reactions reported. You cannot get HPV from the vaccine because there are no live viruses in the vaccine. Your daughter may have mild soreness, redness and swelling where the shot was given. Sometimes there may be fever, nausea, headache and vomiting. Serious allergic reactions to HPV vaccine are rare.

Q: If the vaccine can be given to females up to 26 years old, why should my daughter be vaccinated in Grade 5?

A: It is best to give the vaccine to girls before they have been exposed to HPV, before they become sexually active. As well, studies show that the best immune response to the vaccine occurs in younger girls aged nine to 14 years.

Q: Why aren't boys being offered HPV vaccine?

A: Though boys can also get and spread HPV, the vaccine is not yet licensed for use in boys in Canada. Studies are being done now on boys and men to see if vaccine will protect them from HPV infection too.

Q: What about girls and women who aren't in Grade 5?

A: The vaccine can be purchased with a prescription from a family doctor. HPV vaccine can also be purchased through the Sexual and Reproductive Health clinic at Sheldon Chumir Health Centre, or through the Okotoks Teen Clinic.

For more information on HPV and HPV vaccine, please visit:

- Human papillomavirus-HPV Immunization Program Alberta Health and Wellness (www.health.alberta.ca/public/imm_HP.V.html)
- It's Your Health – Human Papillomavirus(HPV) (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hi-vs/iyh-vsv/disease-maladies/hpv-vph-eng.php)
- Human Papillomavirus(HPV) (Health Canada) (www.healthlinkalberta.ca)

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To speak to a health professional, contact your family doctor, or speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week by calling Health Link Alberta: Calgary: 403-943-LINK(5465) or toll free: 1-866-408-LINK(5465), Mandarin Health Link 403-943-1554, Cantonese Health Link 403-943-1556.