

Questions and Answers on HPV Vaccine

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What do you know about the new vaccine for human papillomavirus (HPV)? Maybe you heard about it on the news, or read about it in the paper. Hopefully, if you're the parent of a pre-teen or young adolescent, a family medical provider has talked with you about whether your child should receive this preventative vaccine. But regardless of the age of your child, you may still have questions about this new immunization.

What is HPV? What does this vaccine prevent?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus in humans which causes many kinds of warts, including genital warts. Some strains of HPV infect the genitals of both men and women, and are transmitted through sexual intercourse. Certain genital HPV strains infect the cervix and can cause changes in the cervical cells, causing them to become abnormal. Over time, these changes put women at risk for cervical cancer.

The new vaccine protects against four of approximately thirty types of HPV that usually cause sexually transmitted genital infections. Two of the types (numbers 16 and 18) are responsible for about 70% of cervical cancer in women. The other two types (6 and 11) cause about 90% of genital warts in women and men.

Who should get the vaccine?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend the HPV vaccine for girls 11-12 years old, although the vaccine is approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for girls as young as nine. In addition, the vaccine is recommended for 13 – 26 year-old females as a “catch-up” to increase the number of girls and women who will be protected against HPV infection.

Currently, the vaccine is not recommended for boys or men. More research is being done to examine the effectiveness and safety of the vaccine in males (and the benefits for their female partners).

Why should girls be vaccinated so young?

The vaccine is only effective in preventing HPV infection, and cannot treat infection once it has already occurred. The best chance of preventing cervical cancer later in life is to vaccinate girls while they are still young, before they have a chance to become exposed to the HPV virus.

If my health care provider recommends that my daughter gets HPV vaccine, does that mean my health care provider thinks my daughter is sexually active?"

No. The vaccine is recommended for all young girls, starting at age eleven. It is important to remember that the health benefits of the vaccine are greatest prior to any sexual activity.

Is the vaccine effective?

Yes. Research studies have shown that the vaccine is almost 100% effective in preventing diseases caused by the four types of HPV covered by the vaccine, including precancerous changes and genital warts. The vaccine does not provide protection against other strains of HPV.

Is the vaccine safe?

The HPV vaccine was studied very carefully to make sure it would be safe and effective. As part of this research, the vaccine was tested in over 11,000 girls and women around the world. These studies showed no serious side effects, although some girls and women did report temporary soreness at the site of the injection. The CDC and the FDA are closely monitoring the safety of the vaccine now that it is widely available.

How is the vaccine administered? How much does it cost, and is it covered by my insurance?

The HPV vaccine is a series of three injections, given over a period of six months. For the vaccine to be most effective, girls and women should make sure they get all three shots. Because the HPV vaccine was just recently put on the market, parents may want to call ahead to make sure their health care providers have the HPV vaccine in stock.

The current retail price of the vaccine is around \$120 a dose. Many private insurance companies now include HPV vaccination as part of their benefits; to be sure, you may want to call and check if your insurance company will pay for the cost of the vaccine.

The vaccine is also covered by the Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program, which includes children birth through 18 years of age who are uninsured, on Medicaid, American Indian or Alaska Native, or seen at a community health center. Please speak with your health care provider if you feel you maybe eligible for this program.

Does my child need to be vaccinated for HPV to attend school in Massachusetts?

No.

I have more questions. Where can I find more information on the HPV vaccine?

If you have questions, or are unsure about whether your child should be vaccinated, try talking to your family medical provider. You can also find more information at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/vis/vis-hpv.pdf>.