

IT'S TIME TO END CERVICAL CANCER



WHAT HEALTH PROVIDERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS AND CERVICAL CANCER:

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



INTRODUCTION

This booklet provides healthcare workers information on the basic concepts of cervical cancer prevention and control. Information is provided on the benefits of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination, the importance of screening to detect precancerous lesions, and the need for timely treatment. Healthcare workers are often called upon to explain the benefits of HPV vaccination, dispel rumors and myths about this vaccine, explain screening procedures and treatment methods for precancerous lesions, as well as answer other questions and concerns regarding cervical cancer prevention. Healthcare workers play an important role in educating and motivating girls and women to be vaccinated against HPV, to seek screening and treatment services, and to have access to these services. The efforts of healthcare workers are essential to ensure the success of cervical cancer prevention and control programs.

In the Americas, cervical cancer causes more than 34,000 deaths per year.

The contribution of healthcare workers in increasing HPV vaccination and screening coverage is a critical step to end cervical cancer.

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

Cancer is a disease in which cells multiply uncontrollably. When cancer develops in the cervix, or neck of the uterus, it is identified as cervical cancer. If the cancer continues to grow, it can spread to other parts of the body, beyond the cervix.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF CERVICAL CANCER?

Persistent infection with high-risk types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) is the main cause of cervical cancer.

WHAT IS THE HUMAN PAPILOMAVIRUS?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus, transmitted through skin-to-skin sexual contact. Most people will have an HPV infection during their lifetime, even though they do not know they have it and many may not have any signs or symptoms of infection. Most HPV infections clear on their own.

CAN ALL TYPES OF HPV CAUSE CERVICAL CANCER?

There are over 100 types of HPV. There are low-risk HPV types, many of which cause genital warts. **These are not related to cancer.** There are high-risk HPV types that cause cervical cancer and other HPV-related cancers. Persistent infection with high-risk HPV can cause precancerous cervical lesions. **If the lesions are not detected and not treated, they can slowly develop into cervical cancer.**

DOES HPV CAUSE ANY OTHER DISEASE?

In rare cases, HPV can cause other types of cancer, including vaginal, vulvar, penile, anal or oral cancer. HPV can also cause genital warts in both men and women.

WHAT ARE GENITAL WARTS?

Genital warts are infections of the skin caused by low-risk types of HPV. Genital warts will not develop into cervical cancer, but they may require treatment if they do not go away on their own.

WHO IS AT RISK OF DEVELOPING CERVICAL CANCER?

Generally, women who are over 30 years of age and have a persistent infection with high-risk types of HPV can develop cervical cancer. Other risk factors for cervical cancer are: multiple sexual partners; early age at first birth;



giving birth to three or more children;
HIV-positive status; tobacco smoking.

DO INTRAUTERINE CONTRACEPTIVE DEVICES (IUDs) OR BIRTH CONTROL PILLS CAUSE CERVICAL CANCER?

No. IUDs and birth control pills do not cause cervical cancer. They protect against unplanned pregnancies.

HOW CAN CERVICAL CANCER BE PREVENTED?

The most effective ways to prevent cervical cancer are to vaccinate girls against HPV, before their first sexual contact, and to screen women aged 30–49 years or according to the national guideline. If a woman's screening test is abnormal, she needs to be treated promptly. If the test is normal, it's a good idea to have repeat screenings, according to national guidelines. Sexually active people should practice behaviors that prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections (e.g. using condoms, having as few sexual partners as possible).

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN HPV AND CERVICAL CANCER?

Cervical cancer is caused by persistent infection with high-risk HPV types. The infection can cause lesions on the cervix, which, over time, if they are not detected and treated, will lead to cancer. Lesions refer to changes in the cells of the cervix, caused by the HPV infection. They are



painless, invisible, and cannot be felt.

CAN MEN ALSO BE INFECTED BY HPV?

Yes, men can have an HPV infection. HPV-related cancer in men, include anal, penile and oral cancer, but these are less common than cervical cancer in women. In some countries, HPV vaccines are administered to boys to prevent these types of cancer and warts.

DOES HPV PRODUCE SYMPTOMS?

An HPV infection does not produce symptoms, which is why it is important for women to be screened for cervical cancer. HPV infection will most often disappear on its own, from the body's natural immune response, particularly in younger women.

CAN HPV BE TREATED?

There is no treatment for HPV infection, but there is treatment for the health effects of HPV infection. Warts can be removed. Cervical precancerous lesions can be treated, depending on the extent of the lesion, with freezing (cryotherapy) or removing (with LEEP or other methods) the HPV-infected cervical cells.

CAN HPV INFECTION BE PREVENTED?

Yes, HPV vaccines prevent infection from HPV. They are safe and effective. Condoms help reduce the chance of HPV infection but do not completely prevent infection, since HPV can be harbored in places in the genital and anal area that are not protected by a condom. Condom use is advisable since condoms can prevent other sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

WHY DO GIRLS NEED TO BE VACCINATED AGAINST HPV?

The HPV vaccine is needed to prevent infection by the high-risk types of HPV and greatly reduce the risk of developing cervical cancer, which is one of the leading causes of cancer death among women in the world.

DOES THE HPV VACCINE PROTECT AGAINST SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS?

No. Regardless of having been vaccinated against HPV, women should use the recommended measures to prevent sexually transmitted infections.

WHO SHOULD RECEIVE THE HPV VACCINE?

PAHO/WHO recommends that girls aged 9-14 years should receive the HPV vaccine. However, country vaccination guidelines may vary.

WHAT IS THE RECOMMENDED SCHEDULE FOR THE HPV VACCINE?

PAHO/WHO recommends two doses of HPV vaccines in girls aged 9-14 years



of age, with the second dose 6 months after the first. Country guidelines may vary. There is no maximum interval between the two doses; however, a range of no greater than 12-15 months is suggested.

HOW LONG WILL THE HPV VACCINE PROTECT AGAINST INFECTION?

The evidence indicates that the protection conferred by the HPV vaccine is long-lasting.

CAN HPV VACCINES GET RID OF HPV INFECTIONS?

No. An HPV vaccine cannot get rid of HPV infections that may be present when the vaccine is administered.

WILL A WOMAN STILL NEED TO BE SCREENED FOR CERVICAL CANCER EVEN IF SHE WAS VACCINATED AGAINST HPV?

It is very important for women aged 30-49 years to receive cervical cancer screening, even if they were previously vaccinated against HPV.

ARE THE HPV VACCINES SAFE AND EFFECTIVE?

Yes. As with all vaccines, the safety and effectiveness of HPV vaccines is monitored very carefully. Studies have demonstrated the safety and effectiveness of HPV vaccines. In addition, millions of people around the world have received the HPV vaccine, without serious adverse events.

WHY IS THE HPV VACCINE RECOMMENDED FOR GIRLS AGED 9-14 YEARS?

For the HPV vaccine to be effective, it must be administered before their first sexual contact.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON ADVERSE REACTIONS TO THE HPV VACCINE?

The common adverse reactions to the HPV vaccine are pain and redness at the injection site, fever, headache and



nausea. They are usually mild reactions that resolve spontaneously.

WHY ARE GIRLS FAINTING AFTER GETTING AN HPV VACCINE?

Adolescents are particularly prone to fainting after any medical procedure, including receiving vaccines, because they are often very nervous about the procedure. To prevent falls and injuries due to fainting, the girl receiving the vaccine needs to be seated before, during and for 15 minutes after the vaccine is given.

DOES VACCINATION AGAINST HPV AFFECT FERTILITY? WILL IT BE MORE DIFFICULT FOR VACCINATED GIRLS TO BECOME PREGNANT OR TO CARRY A PREGNANCY TO TERM?

Cohort studies of vaccinated girls have found no evidence that vaccination against HPV affects a girl's future fertility nor that it causes any problems in future pregnancies.



ARE ALL RECOMMENDED DOSES NECESSARY FOR A GIRL TO BE FULLY PROTECTED AGAINST HPV? ISN'T ONE DOSE ENOUGH?

The HPV vaccine requires more than one dose to be effective. Without all the recommended doses, the HPV vaccine might not be completely effective in preventing cervical cancer. It is important that girls receive all recommended doses and observe the minimum and maximum intervals between the doses to be fully protected.

ARE THERE GIRLS WHO SHOULD NOT BE VACCINATED?

Girls who have an acute illness of moderate or severe intensity should wait until they are well to get vaccinated. Girls who have been previously vaccinated against HPV and have had a severe allergy require a medical evaluation before being vaccinated. Pregnant women should not be vaccinated.





IF A GIRL HAS A COLD, CAN SHE GET VACCINATED?

If at the time of vaccination, the girl has a cold, she can receive the HPV vaccine, since the common cold is not a contraindication for vaccination.

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING?

Cervical cancer screening is the testing of all women at risk for cervical cancer, to check for any early changes in the cervix. If precancerous lesions are detected, but not treated, they will evolve to cancer over time.

WHO SHOULD BE SCREENED FOR CERVICAL CANCER?

Women aged 30-49 years of age (or as indicated by national guidelines) should be screened for cervical cancer. Women who test positive for HIV should be screened for cervical cancer, regardless of their age.

IF A WOMAN DOES NOT HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS, WHY SHOULD SHE UNDERGO SCREENING?

Persistent infection with high-risk HPV can cause changes in the cells of the cervix, called pre-cancer, which does not have symptoms. Women must be screened at least once between the ages of 30 and 49 years and must be treated if there are signs of pre-cancer or cancer.

WHAT IS DONE DURING SCREENING?

There are different tests that can be used to screen women for cervical cancer. For most tests, the healthcare provider will do a pelvic examination to gently swab the cervix. While the test is not painful, it can be a little uncomfortable for the woman to have a pelvic examination. The healthcare provider should try to make it as comfortable as possible for the woman. Some tests give the results right away and others require sending the sample to a laboratory and waiting for results.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE SCREENING TEST RESULT IS NORMAL?

If the screening test is normal, it means that the woman does not have any changes that might develop into cervical cancer. It is important for women to be screened regularly, as indicated by national guidelines.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE SCREENING TEST RESULT IS ABNORMAL?

In most cases, an abnormal screening test means the woman has pre-cancer, a condition that needs to be treated in a health clinic.

DOES AN ABNORMAL SCREENING RESULT MEAN THAT A WOMAN HAS CANCER?

An abnormal screening test does not mean that a woman has cancer. Most often it means that she has pre-cancer, or early changes that could become cancer in many years if not treated. Pre-cancer is easy to treat. Very rarely a woman is found to have signs of cervical cancer at the time of screening. If signs of possible cancer are found, the woman will need to be referred to a hospital for further testing and/or treatment. It is important to treat all precancerous and cancerous lesions.

HOW IS PRE-CANCER TREATED?

The treatment for pre-cancer is to remove the lesions, either by freezing (cryotherapy) or ablation. Cryotherapy involves freezing the lesions. It is not painful, although it involves a pelvic examination, which can be uncomfortable. It is effective and safe. Another treatment method is loop electrosurgical excision procedure (LEEP).

ARE SCREENING TESTS PAINFUL?

Screening tests are painless, though women may feel a little uncomfortable during a pelvic examination. No part of the cervix or womb is removed during a screening test.

IS ONLY ONE SCREENING ENOUGH?

If a woman is screened at least once in her lifetime, between the ages of 30 and 49 years, it may offer some protection. However, if it is possible to screen the woman more than once, this should be done according to the frequency defined by the country's screening guidelines.







PAHO

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www.paho.org/end-cervical-cancer