

*FACT SHEET 2*

# HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV) VACCINES

This series of health education materials is designed to provide information to primary health care providers and the general public about the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer prevention and control.

The series is comprised of the following health education materials:

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HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)

**FACT SHEET 2:**

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV) VACCINES

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TREATMENT OF CERVICAL CANCER



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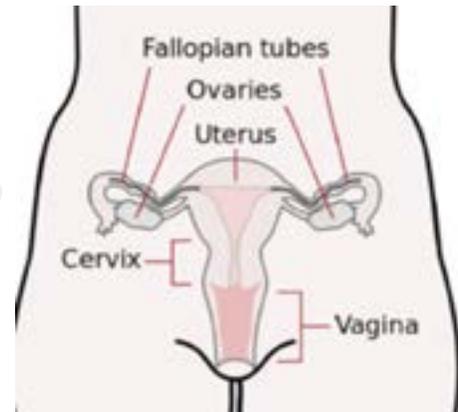
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CERVICAL CANCER  
PREVENTION IN LATIN AMERICA  
AND THE CARIBBEAN



*This health education material provides information on the human papillomavirus vaccines and their use to prevent cervical cancer.*



## WHAT IS THE HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus, transmitted from one person to the other by close contact (skin-to-skin) during any type of sexual interaction. Persistent HPV infection is the main cause of cervical cancer among women and is also a main risk factor for penile and anal cancer in men. It is also a risk factor for mouth and throat cancer. HPV can cause genital warts, which do not lead to cancer.

*Most men and women are infected by HPV at least once in their life, often without knowing it and without any symptoms. In the majority of people infected by HPV, especially those under 30 years of age, the HPV infection clears by itself, as a result of the body's immune response. However, in some people, especially those older than 30 years of age, HPV infection can persist for years and may, over time, lead to changes in the cells and cause cancer.*

There are more than 100 HPV types and each one is identified by a number. There are high and low-risk HPV types:

- \* **Low-risk HPV types can cause genital warts.** The most common of these HPV types are HPV 6 and 11 and some of the HPV vaccines offer protection against these types.
- \* **High-risk HPV types can cause cancer.** The main cause of cervical cancer is persistent infection with one or more high risk HPV types that cause abnormal changes in the cervical cells. The most common of these types are HPV 16 and 18 and the HPV vaccines offer protection against these types.

For cervical cancer, persistent infection with HPV can cause some changes in the cells of the cervix, that begin as pre-cancerous lesions. If these lesions are undetected and untreated, they can develop into cancer.

*Cervical cancer can be treated and cured, if it is detected at an early stage of its development. If cervical cancer is not treated, it can be fatal.*

## HOW IS AN HPV INFECTION DETECTED?

HPV infection can be detected by the HPV test. The HPV test detects infection with the virus that can cause abnormal cells and lead to cervical cancer. The HPV test is generally given to women over 30 years of age, although it is not yet available in all countries. In younger women, HPV infection is very common, and in most cases the infection clears by itself.

## CAN HPV INFECTION BE PREVENTED?

HPV vaccines, when given before the onset of sexual activity, can prevent HPV infection. It is important to educate girls and boys about sex and HPV infection, with age-appropriate and culturally appropriate messages. In adolescents who have initiated sexual activity, sexual health messages should include information about HPV infection and cervical cancer screening, as well as condom use. The use of condoms does not provide full protection against HPV, but it protects against other sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.

## WHAT IS THE HPV VACCINE?

The HPV vaccine protects against HPV infection and can prevent cervical cancer. The HPV vaccine is recommended for girls aged 9-14 years. Some countries also recommend HPV vaccines for boys. It is not necessary to ask whether sexual activity has been initiated before administering the vaccine. If an HPV infection already exists, the HPV vaccine will not

eliminate the infection, which is why it is not typically used in adult women.

The HPV vaccine is given in 2 or 3 separate doses (depending on the country guideline) over six months.

The HPV vaccine is effective and safe and does not have any known long-term side effects. At time of vaccination, pain in the injection site may occur, but it usually resolves shortly after the vaccine is given. There are reported cases of girls fainting right after receiving the vaccine. This, however, can occur regardless of the type of vaccine given in an adolescent population.

HPV vaccines are usually offered through school immunization programs and/or at health clinics.

For girls 9-14 years of age, vaccinate against HPV to prevent cervical cancer.

## IF THE HPV VACCINE WAS GIVEN, IS THERE A NEED FOR AN EARLY DETECTION TEST?

Yes, it is important for women, regardless of whether or not they received the HPV vaccine, to continue to have the early detection tests to prevent cervical cancer, especially if they are over 30 years of age. This can detect precancerous lesions and, with appropriate treatment, prevent cervical cancer.

*Protect children's health by providing HPV vaccines to prevent cervical cancer!*

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## SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

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- » National Cancer Institute, NCI. Significance of changes in the cervix. Guide to Women's Health.
- » Government of Australia. School HPV Vaccination Program.
- » Public Health Agency of Canada. HPV and Men: Questions and Answers.

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