

Human Papillomavirus Vaccine

What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of over 100 viruses. Some types of HPV can cause no harm while others can cause infections that lead to genital warts or the development of cervical cancer. HPV infection is very common; Health Canada reports that as many as 75 percent of sexually active Canadian adults will have at least one genital HPV infection over their lifetime.

The various types of HPV are classified as high or low risk based on their association with cancer. For example:

- HPV types 16 and 18 are classified as high risk because they are most commonly associated with the development of cervical cancer.
- HPV types 6 and 11 are low risk, as they are not linked to cancer, but are most commonly associated with 90 percent of genital wart infections.

Certain HPV infections can cause rare cancers of the vulva, vagina, penis, and anus.

How does HPV spread?

The HPV virus is spread through direct skin-to-skin contact that occurs during sexual touching or sexual activity.

How does someone know if they have HPV?

A person with an HPV infection may not know they are infected because they often have no symptoms. There is also no general test to confirm if someone has been infected with HPV. If, however, an infection occurs with a strain of HPV that causes genital warts, the individual will notice small, hard, whitish bumps on the skin of their genitals. If a woman becomes infected with a type of HPV that causes cervical cancer, it will be detected in the results of her regular Pap smear. Early detection and treatment of abnormal changes found during a Pap smear can help prevent cervical cancer.

In most cases HPV infections, like many infections, will go away on their own over time. Treatments are available, through healthcare providers, for the types of HPV that cause genital warts.

How can an HPV infection be prevented?

Since many types of HPV do not cause symptoms, there is a chance of the infection spreading without the infected person being aware. While the use of condoms during sexual activity offers some protection against this virus, they are not completely reliable as the infection may be on skin that is not covered by the condom.

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What is the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine protects against infection caused by two high risk types of HPV (16 and 18) and two low risk types (6 and 11). HPV types 16 and 18 cause 70 percent of all cervical cancers, while types 6 and 11 cause 90 percent of all genital warts.

Who can get the HPV Vaccine?

Currently, this vaccine has been approved for use in females between 9 and 26 years old. The vaccine is most effective when received before becoming sexually active. It can still be given to sexually active individuals, however, there is no way to guarantee that exposure to the types of HPV that the vaccine protects against has not already occurred.

The HPV vaccine is free to all females in grade 8 in Ontario and will be provided through in-school programs. For all other females age 9 to 26, each dose of the vaccine costs \$150 at KFL&A Public Health and may be covered by some drug benefit plans.

Is the HPV vaccine safe?

Yes, the vaccine is safe and has been approved for use in Canada since 2006. Few side effects have been reported. The most common side effects are redness, tenderness and swelling at the site of the injection. Some people also report fever, nausea, headache, and dizziness. Rarely, difficulty breathing has been reported. Allergic reactions like hives, wheezing, and swelling of the mouth or face can happen very rarely after any vaccine. Bring these symptoms to medical attention right away.

How is the HPV Vaccine given?

The HPV vaccine is given as an injection in the muscle of the upper arm. Three injections in a six-month period are required for full protection. The second injection is given two months after the first, and the third injection is given four months after the second. Recent studies have indicated good protection against HPV five years after vaccination.

Other important information:

- To ensure your grade 8 female receives this vaccine through the in-school immunization program, sign and return the consent provided by Public Health to your child's school before the scheduled clinic date.
- Women who receive the HPV vaccine need to continue to have regular Pap smears.
- The HPV vaccine cannot give someone an HPV infection.
- The HPV vaccine does not contain any antibiotics or preservatives, such as mercury.
- This vaccine is not recommended for women who are pregnant.

Where to go for more information:

KFL&A Public Health
www.kflapublichealth.ca

Health Canada
www.hc-sc-gc.ca

Public Health Agency of Canada
www.publichealth.gc.ca