



Renfrew County & District Health Unit

Questions and Answers Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and HPV Vaccine

What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is the cause of cancer of the cervix and there are many types of HPV. Two of many high-risk types of HPV (16 and 18) are responsible for 70% of cervical cancer cases.

How can someone get HPV?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. It is easily passed between people through skin to skin contact, usually during sexual activity.

Who can get HPV infection?

Anyone can become infected with HPV. At least 70% of all sexually active people will become infected at some point in their lifetime.

What can happen if I get HPV?

Most HPV cervical infections do not cause symptoms and go away without treatment but some infections will not go away by themselves and can stay for years. These long standing or persistent cervical infections with “high risk” HPV types, if not detected early through regular screening (Pap tests – see below), can cause early cell changes and also cervical cancer in women. Both cell changes and cancer of the cervix can be treated. Persistent HPV infection of other genital areas can lead to cancer of the penis, vagina and anus; however, these are rare.

How can HPV infections be prevented?

When used consistently, condoms can reduce but not eliminate the risk of HPV infection. A vaccine currently licenced for females can protect against infection with HPV types 16 and 18, which cause about 70% of all cervical cancer.

Who should get HPV vaccine?

The vaccine is licensed for females 9 to 26 years of age. It is best that females get this vaccine before they become sexually active and are potentially exposed to HPV infection. The vaccine will not protect you if you have already been infected with the HPV types that are prevented by the vaccine.

Your health unit is offering this vaccine free to **Grade 8 girls**.

Other females can go to their doctor or local clinic and pay for the vaccine. Check with your insurance company as they may cover the cost of the vaccine.

How effective is the vaccine used for this year’s Grade 8 program at preventing infection?

The vaccine currently licenced for use in Canada, Gardasil, provides up to 100% protection against infection by four HPV types – 6, 11, 16 and 18. Receiving the vaccine protects against infection with two HPV types that account for 70% of cervical cancer. The vaccine only protects against infection caused by some HPV types so it is important to continue screening with regular Pap tests.

How many shots do I need to get full protection?

Three shots over six months are needed to provide complete protection. It is not known if a booster will be required in the future to maintain immunity from infection beyond the five years of protection reported in recent studies.



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What are the potential side effects of the vaccine?

Some females have reported pain, redness and swelling at the site where they got their injection. Other side effects reported included headaches, fever and nausea, but these all went away.

Can the vaccine cause disease?

No. The vaccine is not live and does not contain HPV; it contains virus-like particles.

Is there a test for the four HPV types in the vaccine?

A test to see if you have specific HPV types covered by the vaccine is not widely available.

Can you get the vaccine after you have started to have sex?

Yes. Girls who have started to have sex can still get the vaccine as it is unlikely that they have been infected with all types of HPV prevented by the vaccine.

Can I still get cervical cancer if I get this vaccine?

Yes. The vaccine will only prevent infection with HPV types 16 and 18 which cause 70% of all cervical cancer. Infection caused by other HPV types can still lead to cervical cancer so females should continue to follow their doctor's recommendations for regular Pap tests that screen for early cell changes and cervical cancer.

Why are girls getting the vaccine but not boys?

Currently, the vaccine is only licensed for females. Studies are underway to assess if the vaccine will benefit males.

How long will this vaccine protect me against HPV infection?

Research indicates that the vaccine protects against infection with the HPV vaccine types for at least five years. Studies are still underway to see if a booster dose will be required later to maintain the protection.

Will this vaccine protect me against other sexually transmitted infections like AIDS and Herpes?

No, AIDS is caused by HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and Herpes is caused by HSV (Herpes Simplex Virus). While these three viruses have similar names and are all sexually transmitted, HPV vaccine does not protect against HIV or HSV. HIV and HSV have different symptoms and health problems.

What is a Pap test?

During a Pap test, cells are collected from the cervix with a small brush and sent to a lab to be examined under a microscope to detect changes in cervical cells. These changes may be due to persistent HPV infection and could lead to cervical cancer if not treated.

Will I still require regular cervical cancer screening (i.e. Pap tests) if I receive the vaccine?

Yes. All females who are or have ever been sexually active should have regular Pap tests to screen for early cell changes and cervical cancer. The vaccine does not protect against other HPV types that cause cervical cancer.