

# THE FACTS about Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and HPV Vaccine

## What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common sexually transmitted infection. Almost everyone gets HPV at some time in their life. Often, the body gets rid of HPV on its own and you never know you were infected.

There are over 100 different types of HPV. Some are harmless. Other types lead to cervical cancer or genital warts.

There is no cure for HPV, but immunization can prevent infection by the most common types of HPV that affect the genital area. HPV vaccine prevents the two types of HPV that cause 70% of cervical cancer.

The *cervix* is the lower part of the uterus that leads into the vagina.

## How common is HPV in Canada?

Health care providers aren't required to report HPV infections, so no exact numbers exist. However, it is estimated that as many as 75% of sexually active men and women will have at least one HPV infection in their lifetime.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada (SOGC) estimates that 10% to 30% of Canadian adults—three to nine million people—are infected with HPV at any one time.

People under the age of 25 have the highest rates of HPV infection.

## How common are the particular types of HPV that the vaccine prevents?

HPV vaccine protects against the most common types of HPV that infect the genital area.

The SOGC estimates that in Canada:

- 2% of sexually active young women have genital warts.
- Between 11% and 25% of women are infected with cancer-causing types of HPV.

## How do you get HPV?

HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact with the vagina, vulva, penis, scrotum, or anus of someone who is infected.

## How can you protect yourself from HPV?

Anyone who has sex is at risk for HPV. Immunization is the best protection from the most common types of HPV. HPV vaccine will greatly reduce your risk of cervical cancer.

Using a condom during sexual intercourse will reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of HPV. You can still be infected by contact with areas the condom doesn't cover.

Limiting the number of sexual partners can also reduce your risk of being infected with HPV.

## How can you find out if you have HPV?

HPV often has no noticeable symptoms, so many people never know that they are infected. Small warts in the genital area—of both men and women—are the only visible symptom of some types of HPV infection.

For women, the only way to know if you are infected with the cancer-causing types of HPV is to have regular Pap testing.

Women should have their first Pap test within three years of becoming sexually active or by age 21, whichever comes first. You should have a Pap test every year until you have three normal test results in a row. After that, you need a Pap test every two years.

## Reducing the Risk of Cervical Cancer

You can decrease your risk of developing cervical cancer by:

- **Having regular Pap tests** to detect changes to the cervix before they become cancerous.
- **Not smoking.** If you smoke, you are about twice as likely as non-smokers to develop cervical cancer. If you stop smoking now, you can greatly reduce your risk of cervical cancer.
- **Getting the HPV vaccine.** HPV vaccine will reduce your risk of cervical cancer by 70%.
- **Practicing safer sex.** Limit the number of sexual partners and always use a condom.

## What is a Pap test?

A Pap test checks for changes in the cells of the cervix. This means that changes can be treated before they can develop into cancer.

During a Pap test, your health care provider inserts a speculum into your vagina so your cervix is visible. Then a few cells are wiped from your cervix and sent to a lab for testing.

**You will still need regular Pap tests even if you have had the HPV vaccine.** HPV vaccine protects against the most common types of HPV, including the two that cause 70% of cervical cancer. However, it does not protect you from the many other types of HPV.

In 2006, about 1350 Canadian women were found to have cervical cancer. About 400 women died from the disease. Cervical cancer can be treated, but the treatment is not always successful. Prevention is the best approach.

### What if you already have HPV?

You can still receive HPV vaccine if you are already infected with one or more of the over 100 types of HPV.

If you are already infected with HPV, the vaccine will have no effect on it—it won't prevent breakouts of its symptoms or cure it.

HPV vaccine protects you from some types of HPV. If you are already infected with one or more of the types of HPV that the vaccine protects against, the vaccine won't cure the type you are infected with or prevent it from turning into cancer. However, the vaccine will still protect you from the types you aren't infected with.

If you have been treated for genital warts or cervical dysplasia, you should still consider immunization.

### Who should get the HPV vaccine?

Canada's National Advisory Committee on Immunization has recommended HPV vaccine for females age 9 to 26. It is not recommended for girls under age 9, males, or pregnant women.

### Can males get HPV and the HPV vaccine?

While males can get HPV, the vaccine is not recommended for them because it has only been tested in girls and women. Studies are being done to find out if the vaccine also works for males. When these studies are completed, the vaccine may be recommended for boys and men.

### How is the HPV vaccine given?

HPV vaccine is given as a series of three needles over a period of six months.

### How effective is the HPV vaccine?

HPV vaccine is 99% effective in preventing infection by the most common types of HPV. HPV vaccine has been shown to be effective for at least five years. Studies looking at its long-term effectiveness are underway.

### How safe is the vaccine?

HPV vaccine is very safe. The most common side effects are pain, redness, itchiness, or swelling at the spot where the needle goes in. Occasionally there may be a mild fever, dizziness, nausea, or headache after being immunized. You cannot get HPV from this vaccine.

### Who pays for HPV vaccine?

Nova Scotia offers HPV vaccine free of charge to girls in grade 7. Anyone else wishing to receive the vaccine will have to pay for it. The vaccine is expensive. Check with a pharmacy for the cost of all three doses.

#### When in doubt, ask!

If you have any questions about HPV or HPV vaccine, or if there is anything you don't understand, contact your local Public Health Services office.

Amherst	667-3319 or 1-800-767-3319
Antigonish	863-2743
Bridgewater	543-0850
Dartmouth	481-5800
New Glasgow	752-5151
Sydney	563-2400
Truro	893-5820
Wolfville	542-6310
Yarmouth	742-7141

For more information on immunization go to:

- Canadian Coalition for Immunization Awareness  
<http://www.immunize.cpha.ca>
- Public Health Agency of Canada  
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca>