

# HPV – facts about the virus, the vaccine and what this means for you

Answers to common questions  
asked by adolescents and  
young adults



# Q&A: Answers to common questions asked by adolescents and young adults

## HPV and vaccination

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What is HPV and why should I be vaccinated against it?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. There are over 200 known types of the virus, 30 of which are transmitted through sexual activity.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the world. Almost 80% of sexually active people will get infected with one or more HPV types in their lifetime. HPV infection can lead to several types of cancer and genital warts. Cervical cancer is the most common type of cancer caused by HPV, and it is the fourth most common cancer in women worldwide.

There are several reasons to get vaccinated against HPV:

- Vaccination against HPV greatly reduces your risk of getting HPV infections and the serious diseases HPV can cause.
- By getting the vaccine, you will protect not only yourself, but also your current or future partner from HPV infection.
- HPV vaccines are proven safe and effective.

How does the vaccine work?

The vaccine helps the body develop immunity to HPV by imitating an HPV infection. When the vaccine is injected into your arm, your immune system responds as if this was the real virus and makes antibodies to fight it off. Once these antibodies are produced, they stay in the body for years or even decades and are ready to fight off any future infection with the real HPV virus types contained in the vaccine.

Does the vaccine work?

The HPV vaccine is one of the most effective vaccines ever developed. Studies show that up to 100% of individuals vaccinated with the HPV vaccine develop enough antibodies to protect themselves against the HPV types present in the vaccine. It also provides cross-protection against some types not included in the vaccine.

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What will happen if I don't get vaccinated?

About 80% of people who have not had the HPV vaccine before they become sexually active will become infected with at least one type of HPV, even if they have only one sexual partner in their lifetime.

Most infections (70-90%) clear up on their own. But there are many types of HPV, so people who recover from one infection can get infected with other HPV types in the future.

If an HPV infection does not clear up, it can develop into a pre-cancerous lesion (cluster of abnormal cells) and eventually, after years or even decades, the lesion can develop into cancer. The most common HPV-related disease is cervical cancer, but the virus can also cause cancer of the cervix, vulva, penis, anus, throat and neck as well as genital warts.

I am older than 14. Is it still worth getting vaccinated?

Yes, it is probably still worth getting vaccinated, but how well the vaccine works for you will depend on your age and sexual history.

Your body's immune response to the vaccine will be strongest if you get the vaccine at the recommended age; and it is best to be vaccinated against HPV before becoming sexually active to be sure that you have not already been exposed to any of the HPV types targeted by the vaccine. However, the vaccine has been shown to be safe and effective in people up to the age of 45 for any targeted HPV types that they were not exposed to before getting the vaccine.

For this reason, some countries offer the vaccine to individuals beyond the recommended age. Keep in mind that if you get the first dose of HPV vaccine after the age of 15, you will need three doses rather than two to ensure that you are fully protected.

No one in my family has had cervical cancer. Is it still important for me to get the vaccine?

Yes.  
HPV is not a genetic disease. If no one in your family has had cervical cancer this does not mean that you will not develop the disease.

I am in a steady relationship and only have one sexual partner. Does it still make sense to get vaccinated?

Yes.  
HPV infection rates are high even among people with only one sexual partner. While you may have (or plan to have) one sexual partner in your lifetime, he or she may have other sexual partners before you or during your relationship. Either of you may also have other partners in the future: vaccination now will protect both of you from becoming infected later and passing the virus on to others.

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I had an HPV infection but my latest PAP test was clean. Am I now immune to HPV?

No.

If you have recovered from an HPV infection, you are unlikely to become infected with the same HPV type again. But there are many types of HPV and immunity against one type does not protect you from contracting the others.

I have a chronic health condition. Can I still get vaccinated?

In most cases, yes.

However you should discuss the risks and benefits of vaccination with your health care provider.

Should I take an anti-histamine before getting vaccinated?

No.

Taking an anti-histamine before receiving the HPV vaccine is not recommended.

Before vaccinating, health care providers should ask their patients if they have any allergies or have ever had an allergic reaction to any vaccine. Allergies to vaccines are rare but some vaccines contain substances or have been in contact with substances that people can potentially be allergic to. The health care provider can advise whether a person's allergy is relevant for the specific vaccine being given.

Does it hurt to get the vaccine?

Injection with the HPV vaccine feels like any other shot, and the arm used for the injection may feel sore for a day or so.

In what part of my body will I get the injection?

The injection is given in the upper, outer part of the arm. This is where most common vaccines are given.

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## Quality, safety and side effects

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Can I get cancer from the vaccine?

No.  
Vaccination against HPV *cannot cause* cancer, but it can *prevent* certain cancers by preventing infection with the types of HPV responsible for them. The vaccine contains particles that mimic HPV, but they are not live virus and cannot cause infection.

Will the vaccine affect future pregnancies or my chances of getting pregnant?

No.  
HPV vaccination will not affect your chances of getting pregnant or in any way impact future pregnancies. *Not* getting the vaccine will put your future at greater risk. Almost all sexually active people (approximately 80%) will become infected with one or more HPV types and some will go on to develop an HPV-related cancer. Cervical cancer, the most common HPV-related disease for women, can be fatal or lead to long-term health problems such as infertility.

My skin is red and sore where I got the shot. Is this normal?

Yes.  
Redness, swelling and arm pain are common side effects of the HPV vaccine, as well as of many other vaccines. This should go away within a few hours to a day. If the pain or redness persists or you notice any other symptoms that are out of the ordinary, report this to your nurse or doctor.

# Further information

Video: How the HPV vaccine works

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF7pBzU4D20>

Key facts about human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs380/en/>

Genital HPV infection – fact sheet

<https://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/stdfact-hpv.htm>