

Pap tests and cervical cancer vaccine Important information for women aged <26 years

What is cervical cancer?

It is cancer of the cervix. The cervix is the lower part or opening of the womb (uterus). Cancer can develop here when abnormal cells grow out of control and can spread into surrounding tissues and can be potentially deadly. It is caused by infection with certain types of a very common virus, called Human Papilloma Virus (HPV).

How common is cervical cancer?

There are >800 new cases in Australia each year and >200 women die from the disease. It is the second most common form of women's cancer throughout the world and is preventable. Because of Australian "Pap Test" screening programs, the incidence of deadly cervical cancer has fallen dramatically in the last decade.

What is a Pap Test?

It is a simple screening test. A few cells are taken from the cervix with a soft brush and smeared onto a glass slide, then sent to the lab for microscopic analysis. Prior to the test, a speculum is inserted into the vagina to hold the walls of the vagina apart. This enables the cervix to be visualised properly. A doctor or a nurse can perform this test and it takes only a few minutes. Women without any symptoms are tested at regular intervals (every 2 years) to check for any cell changes. If changes are found EARLY, they can be monitored by more frequent Pap tests, or if needed, changes can be investigated further to get a more accurate diagnosis. Therefore the abnormal cells can be treated well before cancer develops. It can often take 10 years to develop cervical cancer, so having regular Pap tests every 2 years from age 18-70 can prevent cervical cancer by up to 90%.

What is Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

It is a very common virus that affects both females and males. There are more than 100 different types of the virus. The same virus also causes the common types of warts found on the hands and feet. Most types of HPV are harmless, do not cause any symptoms and go away on their own. Up to 70% of sexually active women will become infected with at least one HPV type in their lifetime. Some are high risk types (HPV 16 and 18) and these types cause 70% of cervical cancers. Others are low risk types (HPV 6 and 11) that can cause >90% of genital warts and usually benign (non cancerous) changes in the cervix. Both high and low risk types of HPV can cause abnormal Pap tests.

Who needs Pap tests?

Anyone who has any kind of sexual activity involving genital contact could get HPV. If you are over 18 and have ever had sex, even if you no longer have sex, or are younger and have been sexually active for 2 years, you should have Pap tests every 2 years until the age of 70. Because the virus may not show any signs or symptoms, you can have the virus without even knowing it. It is highly contagious. It is estimated that many people get their first type of HPV infection within their first few years of becoming sexually active. Genital HPV infection is not something to feel embarrassed or ashamed about. It is very common, hence the reason for almost all women to have regular Pap tests.

Does everyone with HPV get cervical cancer?

NO. For most people with HPV, the body's immune system is adequate to fight the virus. Up to 90% of infections are cleared within 36 months. For those who don't clear the "low-risk" types of virus, benign changes can occur in the cervix (abnormal but not cancerous). For those who don't clear the "high-risk" types of virus, abnormal changes can occur in the cervix that may lead to cervical cancer later in life. Early detection is so important as cervical cancer CAN be prevented.

How can I prevent contracting HPV?

Because HPV is so easily passed on, it is quite difficult to prevent infection with this very common virus. Up to 70% of women will become infected with at least one type of HPV, but remember that most people clear the virus. Condoms can help reduce the risk of genital HPV but may not provide 100% protection. However, there is a vaccine now available that can protect against the 4 more serious types of the 100 or more types of HPV.

What is HPV vaccination (Cervical Cancer Vaccine)?

It is now possible to have a vaccination to protect against HPV types that account for >70% of cervical cancer cases and the majority of pre-cancerous cervical abnormalities. GARDASIL is the name of the vaccine and it is approved for use in females aged 9-26 years. And is best given prior to a woman becoming sexually active. Vaccination does not protect against all HPV types that cause cervical cancer, therefore it is important that vaccinated women continue to have 2 yearly Pap tests from age 18. The vaccine helps protect against 4 types of HPV (6,11,16,18). These account for 70% of cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts.

PTO

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Important facts about vaccination

- Vaccination does not substitute for Pap tests
- As with all vaccines, it may not fully protect everyone who gets the vaccine
- Vaccination will not protect against HPV types that you already have been exposed to.
- Vaccination works best if given prior to exposure with these types of HPV, therefore it is best given prior to any sexual activity.

What is the vaccination program?

There are 3 injections over 6 months. The first dose is given at a date you and the doctor choose. The second dose is given 2 months after the first dose and the third dose is given 6 months after the first dose.

Women who have had an abnormal Pap test may still benefit from the vaccine, as the type of HPV that caused the abnormality may not be the one in the vaccine. Even if infection has been acquired with one of these HPV types (6,11,16,18), protection against infection and disease from the other HPV types in the vaccine will be achieved. Infection with all 4 types is unlikely fortunately. There is no evidence, at this stage, that a booster is required. The vaccination is 100% effective at 5 years.

Where can I get the vaccine?

From July 2007 until 30th June 2009, free HPV vaccine was available from your general practitioner and other immunisation providers. It is no longer free and costs approximately \$135 per dose (approximate total cost of \$400 for the 3 injections). Some health insurance providers may give a rebate but you will need to check with the company first. It is available on private prescription for females aged 9-26 and is given by your general practitioner.

Are there any side effects?

Few serious adverse events were reported during clinical trials. The most common side effects were:

- Mild to moderate pain, redness or swelling at the injection site.
- Headache, fever and nausea are less common.
- It should not be used in pregnant women who plan to continue with the pregnancy
- It can be used in women who are breastfeeding
- Vaccination should be delayed in women who have moderate to severe illness with fever, until they have fully recovered from the illness.

HPV Register

A National HPV Vaccination Program Register (HPV Register) is being developed by the Australian Government. Personal details will be kept confidential. It will enable reminders to be issued if the course of 3 injections is incomplete. Information about sexual history is definitely not required. You may decline having your details included in the HPV Register, but if your details are not included in the Register it will be impossible to contact you about missed or booster doses.

This information is for you to keep.

Further information is available at The National Immunisation infoline on 1800 671 811 or www.ncirs.usyd.edu.au www.immunise.health.gov.au www.cancerscreening.gov.au

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