City of Milwaukee Health Department
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HPV Vaccination Frequently Asked Questions

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Why are HPV vaccines needed?

Certain human papillomavirus (HPV) types cause cancer, including: cervical, vulvar, vaginal, penile, anal, and oropharyngeal (base of the tongue, tonsils and back of throat) cancers. Certain HPV types also cause most cases of genital warts in men and women.

HPV is a common virus that is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity with another person. It is possible to have HPV without knowing it, so it is possible to unknowingly spread HPV to another person.

HPV vaccine is a strong weapon in prevention. These safe, effective vaccines are available to protect females and males against some of the most common HPV types and the health problems the virus can cause.

How common are the health problems caused by HPV?

HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer in women. There are about 12,000 new cervical cancer cases each year in the United States. Cervical cancer causes about 4,000 deaths in women each year in the United States. There are about 15,000 HPV-associated cancers in the United States that may be prevented by vaccines each year in women, including cervical, anal, vaginal, vulvar and oropharyngeal cancers.

About 7,000 HPV-associated cancers in the United States may be prevented by vaccine each year in men, and oropharyngeal cancers are the most common.

About 1 in 100 sexually active adults in the United States have genital warts at any given time.

What HPV vaccines are available in the United States?

Two HPV vaccines are licensed by the FDA and recommended by CDC. These vaccines are Cervarix (made by GlaxoSmithKline) and Gardasil (made by Merck).

How are the two HPV vaccines similar?

Both vaccines are very effective against diseases caused by HPV types 16 and 18; HPV 16 and 18 cause most cervical cancers, as well as other HPV associated cancers. Both vaccines have been shown to prevent cervical precancers in women. Both vaccines are safe, and are given as shots and require 3 doses.

How are the two HPV vaccines different?

Only one of the vaccines (Gardasil) protects against HPV types 6 and 11, the types that cause most genital warts in females and males. Only one of the vaccines (Gardasil) has been tested and licensed for use in males. While both vaccines protect against HPV16, which is the most common HPV type responsible for HPV associated cancers including cancers of cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, and anus and oropharynx, only one of the vaccines (Gardasil) has been tested and shown to protect against

pre-cancers of the vulva, vagina, and anus.

Who should get HPV vaccine?

Cervarix and Gardasil are licensed, safe, and effective for females ages 9 through 26 years. CDC recommends that all 11 or 12 year old girls get the 3 doses (shots) of either brand of HPV vaccine to protect against cervical cancer. Gardasil also protects against most genital warts, as well as some cancers of the vulva, vagina and anus. Girls and young women ages 13 through 26 should get HPV vaccine if they have not received any or all doses when they were younger.

Gardasil is also licensed, safe, and effective for males ages 9 through 26 years. CDC recommends Gardasil for all boys aged 11 or 12 years, and for males aged 13 through 21 years, who did not get any or all of the three recommended doses when they were younger. All men may receive the vaccine through age 26, and should speak with their doctor to find out if getting vaccinated is right for them.

Why is HPV vaccine recommended at ages 11 or 12 years?

For the HPV vaccine to work best, it is very important for preteens to get all 3 doses (shots) long before any sexual activity with another person begins. It is possible to be infected with HPV the very first time they have sexual contact with another person. Also, the vaccine produces higher antibody that fights infection when given at this age compared to older ages.

Are the HPV vaccines safe and effective?

FDA has licensed the vaccines as safe and effective. Both vaccines were tested in thousands of people around the world. These studies showed no serious side effects. Common, mild side effects included pain where the shot was given, fever, headache, and nausea. As of July 2012, approximately 46 million doses of quadrivalent HPV vaccine were distributed in the United States. As with all vaccines, CDC and FDA continue to monitor the safety of these vaccines very carefully. These vaccine safety studies continue to show that HPV vaccines are safe.

Why aren’t HPV vaccines recommended for people older than 26?

Both vaccines were studied in thousands of people from 9 through 26 years old and found to be safe and effective for these ages. The vaccine is not licensed in the United States for persons over age 26 years, as GARDASIL has not been demonstrated to prevent HPV-related outcomes in a general population of women and men older than 26 years of age.

Will HPV vaccination be covered by health insurance?

Most health insurance plans cover recommended vaccines. But there may be a lag time after a vaccine is recommended before it gets added to insurance plans. Some insurance plans may not cover any or all vaccines. Check with your insurance provider to see if the cost of the vaccine is covered before going to the doctor.

How can my child get an HPV vaccine if I don’t have insurance?

The Vaccines for Children (VFC) program helps families of eligible children who might not otherwise have access to vaccines. The program provides vaccines at no cost to doctors who serve eligible children.

Related Scientific Articles:

Gee J, Naleway A, Shui I, Baggs J, Yinc R, Lic R, Kulldorff, M, Lewis E, Fireman B, Daley, MF, Klein NP, Weintraub ES. **Monitoring the safety of quadrivalent human papillomavirus vaccine: Findings from the Vaccine Safety Datalink**, Vaccine 2011 Oct 26;Vol 29, Issue 46: 8279-8284.

Slade BA, Leidel L, Vellozzi C, Woo EJ, Hua J, Sutherland A, Izurieta HS, Ball R, Miller N, Braun MM, Markowitz LE, Iskander J**. Postlicensure safety surveillance for quadrivalent human papillomavirus recombinant vaccine**. JAMA 2009 Aug 10;302(7):750-7.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and ACIP. **Quadrivalent human papillomavirus vaccine**. [PDF - 444 KB] MMWR 2007 Mar 23; 56(RR-2).

MMWR - FDA Licensure of Bivalent Human Papillomavirus Vaccine (HPV2, Cervarix) for Use in Females and Updated HPV Vaccination Recommendations from ACIP.

MMWR - FDA Licensure of Quadrivalent Human Papillomavirus Vaccine (HPV4, Gardasil) for Use in Males and Guidance from ACIP.