

 Expert View

What I Tell Every Patient About the HPV Vaccine

HPV can cause cancer and genital warts. So who should get the vaccine, and why? An ob-gyn explains.



Dr. Pamela Deak



HPV (human papillomavirus) is a virus that's spread by skin-to-skin and sexual contact. It is the most common STI (sexually transmitted infection) in the United States. Different

strains of HPV are linked to most cervical cancers, genital warts, and some rare forms of cancer of the anus, vagina, penis, mouth, and throat.

Fortunately, [there's a vaccine](#) that's extremely effective at preventing HPV infection, especially when boys and girls are vaccinated before they become sexually active. Here's what I tell all my patients about the vaccine.

The vaccine is very, very effective

If you are vaccinated before being exposed to the virus, the HPV vaccine is 97 percent effective in preventing cervical cancer and cell changes that could lead to cancer. Plus, it's almost 100 percent effective in preventing external genital warts.

The vaccine we use now protects against nine of the highest-risk HPV strains. This includes the strains that cause the majority of cervical pre-cancers and cancers, and the strains that cause the majority of external lesions and genital warts.

The vaccine is safe – and important for public health

The vaccine has been proven to be very safe with no significant risks or side effects. And the more we vaccinate, the more we'll have a significant decrease in HPV transmission and HPV – related cancer.

The vaccine is best for children, but adults can get it too

The ideal age for HPV vaccination is 11 to 12, but it can be given to everyone age 9 through 26. If you are older than 26, have not been vaccinated, and are at risk of a new HPV infection, you and your ob-gyn can talk about whether you need the HPV vaccine. The vaccine is approved for people through age 45.

It's ideal to be vaccinated when you are receiving your normal vaccinations during childhood and adolescence. So most of the shots are given by a pediatrician or family doctor. But ob-gyns and other health care professionals also can give adults catch-up shots if you were not vaccinated earlier.

The vaccine is still helpful even if you have already tested

The vaccine is still helpful even if you have already tested positive for HPV or have been sexually active for a while

Most HPV transmission happens when people first become sexually active. But women who have already tested positive for HPV usually aren't positive for all nine types that we vaccinate for. So in some cases, we'll recommend those patients get the vaccine if they haven't already. And if you're older – midlife age, and new on the dating scene and sexually active – you should ask your doctor about the vaccine too.

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