

# Cervical cancer vaccination - common questions and answers

## **What is cervical cancer?**

Cervical cancer (cancer of the cervix\*) is a disease where abnormal cells grow in the cervix. The cancer may spread throughout the body.

Cervical cancer is not common in Australia, because of the success of Pap smears (National Cervical Screening Program). A vaccine, which has recently been developed, can also prevent cervical cancer.

However, over two hundred women die each year in Australia from cervical cancer.

\*The cervix is a part of the female reproductive system  
between the vagina and the uterus (womb).  
*Insert on page 2 of the brochure*

## **What causes cervical cancer?**

Genital infection with particular types of human papillomavirus (HPV) can cause cervical cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer. This usually takes more than 10 years to develop.

Most women who have HPV, slowly clear the virus naturally and do NOT develop  
cervical cancer.

## **What is HPV (human papillomavirus)?**

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the name for a group of viruses that cause skin warts, genital warts and some cancers.

Many different types of HPV can affect different parts of the body. Some of these types can infect the genital area. Warts on other parts of the body, such as the hands, are caused by different HPV types.

HPV types that can cause genital warts or cervical cancer can be spread by direct, skin-to-skin contact during all types of sexual activity with a person who has the virus.

Anyone who has ever had sexual contact could have HPV – it is so common that four in five people will have had genital HPV infection at some time in their lives. Most genital infections with HPV do not cause any symptoms and people do not know they have the infection.

## **Can HPV infection be treated?**

There is no treatment for HPV infection. Treatments are available for the effects of the virus, such as abnormal changes to cells in the cervix and genital warts.

Don't confuse human papillomavirus (HPV) with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or herpes virus, as they are different infections.

### **Can HPV infection be prevented?**

Yes. A HPV vaccine called GARDASIL®, which is available in Australia, can prevent infection with four HPV types. Two types cause 7 out of 10 cervical cancers. The other two types cause 9 out of 10 cases of genital warts.

If you have had sexual contact then you may have been infected with some of these HPV types. If you have already been infected with any of these four HPV types, your protection against cervical cancer and/or genital warts after vaccination may be reduced.

The HPV vaccine cannot protect females against cervical cancer and genital warts caused by other HPV types that are not in the vaccine.

Regular Pap smears are still essential because the HPV vaccine does not prevent all cervical cancers.

### **How is the vaccine given?**

GARDASIL® is given as a series of three injections into upper arm muscle. It is usually given within a six month period:

- first dose: at a chosen date;
- second dose: 1 - 2 months after the first dose; and
- third dose: 4 - 6 months after the first dose.

The vaccine is most effective when all three doses have been given, that is, the full course is complete. Missed doses should be given as soon as possible.

### **How safe is GARDASIL®?**

The vaccine was shown to be safe during large clinical trials.

You may experience minor side effects such as redness, pain, and swelling at the injection site and mild fever. For arm soreness and swelling or fever you can take paracetamol as directed on the package and place a cool, moist cloth over the injection site. If the pain and swelling continue for more than two days you should see a general practitioner.

You should not have the HPV vaccine if you are pregnant or if you have had a serious allergic reaction to yeast or any other vaccine components (aluminium phosphate, sodium chloride, L-histidine, polysorbate and sodium borate).

### **Should I be vaccinated if I've had sexual contact?**

Yes. You should still consider being vaccinated if you have ever had sexual contact with someone.

If you have had sexual contact, you may still benefit from the vaccine because it is unlikely you will have been infected with the two HPV types that can cause cervical cancer, and the two HPV types that can cause genital warts, which are covered by the vaccine.

### **What if I am exposed to HPV between doses?**

Exposure to any of the four HPV types covered by the vaccine before the three doses are completed may slightly lessen the effect of the vaccine. You should still have the full course of the vaccine.

### **Should I be vaccinated if I have had genital warts or an abnormal Pap smear?**

You may benefit from HPV vaccine if you have had genital warts and/or an abnormal Pap smear result. However, the HPV vaccine may be less effective depending on which HPV type caused the infection you had.

No reliable tests are available to check for past and current infections with the specific HPV types covered in the vaccine.

Pap smears show abnormal changes to cells in the cervix, which have been caused by HPV infection.

### **What is a Pap smear?**

A Pap smear is a quick and simple test in which a number of cells are collected from your cervix and sent to a laboratory where they are tested for changes. No medications or anaesthetics are required and a doctor or women's health nurse can easily do it.

Regular Pap smears are still essential because the HPV vaccine does not prevent all cervical cancers.

You can talk to your general practitioner or health care professional about tests and treatments available for other genital infections.

### **Should I have Pap smears after I have been vaccinated?**

Yes. The HPV vaccine does not protect against all HPV types that can cause cervical cancer. All females, whether vaccinated against HPV or not, should have regular Pap smears as recommended.

The current recommendations are that women should have a Pap smear every two years from the age of 18 or two years after having sex, whichever is later.

Regular pap smears are still essential because the HPV vaccine does not prevent all cervical cancers. Pap smears detect abnormal changes to cells in the cervix so treatment can start before cancer develops.

For more information about Pap smears and cervical screening see the National Cervical Screening Program website at <http://www.cancerscreening.gov.au>.

### **How can I get the HPV vaccine?**

The National Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Vaccination Program, will provide free HPV vaccine to females aged from 12-26 years.

Free vaccine will be available through general practitioners and community immunisation providers from July 2007 to June 2008. It is important to note a consultation fee may be payable to general practitioners.

You will need to finish the full course of 3 doses before the end of June 2009 and before you reach 27 years of age.

The full course of three doses of GARDASIL® should be given within a 6 month period.

Under the National Immunisation Program, free HPV vaccine will be available for girls aged 12-18 years in schools in 2007 and 2008.

### **Will I need to have booster doses of HPV vaccine?**

Current research shows it is unlikely booster doses will be needed, but the need for booster doses will continue to be reviewed.

### **Is free HPV vaccine available for boys?**

No. HPV vaccine for boys is available from general practitioners, but it will not be provided free and a consultation fee may also need to be paid to the general practitioner.

GARDASIL® has been approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) for males aged 9 to 15 years, which means it has been tested for safety. However, research into the effectiveness of the vaccine in preventing HPV infection and related diseases in men has not been completed.

### **Is HPV vaccine available for women older than 26 years?**

No. Older females are likely to have had more exposure to HPV, so the benefits of HPV vaccine may be reduced. Clinical trials into the benefits vaccine for women older than 26 years continue.

### **Will information about me be collected if I am vaccinated with the HPV vaccine?**

A National HPV Vaccination Program Register (HPV Register) is being developed by the Australian Government to collect data about the Program. Personal details identifying you will be kept confidential.

Personal information collected will be used to evaluate the impact of the HPV Vaccination Program on cervical cancer rates, to issue reminders if the course is incomplete, to issue confirmation the course is complete and to contact vaccine recipients if booster doses are required. If your details are not included in the Register it will not be possible to contact you about missed or booster doses.

Information will not be sought about your sexual history.

You can decline having your details included in the HPV Register.

**Where can I get more information?**

Information on HPV infection and HPV vaccine is available on the Immunise Australia Program website at [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au).

You can also phone the National Immunisation Infoline on 1800 671 811 or contact your general practitioner, women's health nurse and state or territory health department for more information.

Information about Pap smears and the National Cervical Screening Program is available on the Cancer Screening website at [www.cancerscreening.gov.au](http://www.cancerscreening.gov.au).

Note: This information is correct as at March 2007.

For the back panel of the brochure:

**State and Territory contact information:**

ACT: (02) 6205 2300

NSW: Contact the local Public Health Units (look under "Health" in the White pages)

NT: (08) 8922 8044

QLD: 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84)

SA: (08) 8226 7177

Tas: 1800 671 738

Vic: 1300 882 008

WA: (08) 9321 1312

Immunise Australia Program logo (colour)

[www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

National Cervical Screening Program logo

[www.cancerscreening.gov.au](http://www.cancerscreening.gov.au)