

HPV: What teens need to know

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in Canada. That means it passes from person to person through sexual contact.

There are over 100 types of HPV but only a few of them cause serious diseases. Some types can infect the genital and oral areas of men and women.

How is it spread?

- HPV infection can be passed through any type of sexual activity (vaginal, oral, anal or petting), not just intercourse. Some types of HPV are spread by skin-to-skin contact.
- HPV is very common and very contagious. Teens have high rates of infection. People usually get it after they start any type of sexual activity.
- As many as 3 in 4 Canadians get HPV sometime during their life.

Does HPV make people sick?

- Most people don't know they have HPV, because usually there are no symptoms.
- Some people with HPV will have genital warts (flat, flesh-colored bumps or cauliflower-like bumps that vary in size). In women, genital warts can grow on the vulva, the area between vagina and anus, in the vagina and on the cervix. In men, genital warts can grow on the penis, near the anus, on the scrotum, or between the penis and the scrotum.
- HPV is the leading cause of cervical cancer (cancer of the cervix) in women.
- HPV can also cause cancer of the vulva in women, and penile (penis) cancer in men. Men and women can also get oral and anal cancers.

- Most people who are infected with HPV do not develop cancer. If it happens, the cancer develops slowly, after the virus has been in the body for many years.

Is there an HPV vaccine?

- There is a safe and effective vaccine that can help protect girls and women, boys and men from the kinds of HPV that most often cause cancer and warts.
- Children 9 years of age and older, as well as adults, should get this vaccine. For best results, all children should be vaccinated at 9 to 13 years old, before they engage in sexual contact.
- To be protected you will need 2 or 3 doses of vaccine, depending on your age and which vaccine is used. If 3 doses, the second dose is given 2 months after the first, and the third dose at least 6 months after the first. If 2 doses, the second dose is given 6 to 12 months after the first.

Do I need it if I am not having sex yet?

The best way to protect yourself from any STI is to not have sex. However, even if you are not having sex (intercourse) you can still become infected with HPV through sexual touching or oral sex.

For the vaccine to work the best, you need to get it before you start any sexual activity. Remember that it may take up to a month after the last dose before you are protected.

Does the HPV vaccine protect against all sexually transmitted infections?

No. The HPV vaccine does not protect against other STIs. It also does not protect against all types of HPV.

The vaccine does not work as well if you have already been infected with the kinds of HPV that are in the vaccine.

If you are sexually active, safe sex practices—including using a condom—can help reduce the risk of other infections.

If you are a sexually active female, even if you have received the HPV vaccine, you should have regular Pap tests. A Pap test looks for very early signs of cervical cancer.

How safe is the HPV vaccine?

It is very safe. The vaccine has already been given safely to millions of girls, boys and young adults. You cannot get HPV from the vaccine.

With any vaccine, there may be some redness, swelling or pain where the needle went into the arm or leg.

Is there any reason to NOT get the vaccine?

- If you are pregnant or think you may be pregnant, you should not get vaccinated because the vaccine has not yet been tested in pregnancy. However, in cases where the vaccine has been given to women who did not yet know they were pregnant, there were no bad effects on the mother or the baby.
- People who have had a serious allergic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine (swelling of the face or lips, difficulty breathing or if your blood pressure drops) should not get it again *unless* seen by a specialist and vaccinated in a special clinic that can control severe reactions.
- You do not need to delay getting the vaccine if you are sick with a minor cold or have a minor fever.

Where can I get the vaccine?

In most provinces, boys and girls can get the vaccine as part of a program at school. If it is not given at school, talk to your doctor about the vaccine.

Additional resources

- Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada
(<http://hpvinfo.ca/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Infectious Diseases and Immunization Committee



© 2024 – Canadian Paediatric Society
cps.ca/en/ – info@cps.ca

Available at www.caringforkids.cps.ca