

# Frequently Asked Questions about the HPV Vaccine (*Gardasil*)



Genital human papillomavirus (HPV) is passed from person to person during sexual contact. This includes intimate sexual contact, but not necessarily intercourse. It is the most common sexually transmitted virus in the United States. About 20 million people in the U.S. have it, with 6.2 million new infections each year.

There are many kinds of HPV. Most HPV infections do not have obvious symptoms or signs. Often the body will fight off this virus on its own, like a cold virus. Some types of HPV can cause genital warts. This can lead to changes that could turn into cancer in a woman's cervix (mouth of the womb).

A vaccine for the types of HPV that cause these harmful changes to the cervix as well as some types of genital warts was recently approved. Kaiser Permanente recommends the vaccine for all girls 11–12 years old. Young women age 13–18 should also consider getting the vaccine.

## Why is the vaccine given only to girls and young women?

Studies have only been done with girls because of the link between some types of HPV and cancer of the cervix. (Men do not have cervixes.) Studies on how the vaccine affects men are now going on.

## Why is the vaccine being given to girls between ages 11 and 18?

Because of several things:

- We want to prevent the types of HPV that are linked to some types of genital warts and harmful changes to the cervix.
- The vaccine works best before girls first have sex. Being exposed to HPV is very common. It happens soon after girls start sexual activity.
- Pre-teens are most likely to receive all their shots (vaccinations) at well check visits. As young adults, they sometimes see their doctor or nurse practitioner less often. Also, younger girls have a stronger response to vaccinations than older women.

## What if a young woman is already sexually active? Can she still get the vaccine?

The vaccine works best for girls or young women who have not yet had sex. If they have been sexually active (including intimate contact but not necessarily intercourse), the vaccine becomes less and less effective. This happens because they have probably been exposed to HPV. This is especially likely if they have had more than one partner. Since HPV is so common, and the body fights off most HPV infections, having the vaccine after

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being exposed to HPV is usually not helpful. It would be like giving the chicken pox vaccine after the person already had the chicken pox—having chicken pox means your body already recognizes the virus and does not need immunization against it. Young women age 19–26 should talk with their health care provider to see if the vaccine might be right for them. The vaccine is not approved for women over age 26.

## Does the HPV vaccine protect against other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

No, the HPV vaccine only works against certain types of HPV. Anyone having sex needs to protect themselves against other STDs, HIV/AIDS, and unplanned pregnancies by using latex or polyurethane condoms, and regular birth control methods.

## Does the vaccine cure cervical cancer?

The HPV vaccine does not cure or treat cancer of the cervix. Studies do show that it prevents some of the harmful changes that can lead to cervical cancer.

## Does the HPV vaccine ensure that cervical cancer will never develop?

No. There are other kinds of HPV that the vaccine does not protect against. Also, it's possible that the immunity from the vaccine will wear off over

time. So it is very important that women who have been vaccinated continue to receive routine cervical cancer screening. This includes PAP tests and HPV screening for women starting at age 30.

## What about PAP tests?

Regular PAP tests are very important in preventing cervical cancer. The first PAP test should happen 3 years after sexual activity begins, or age 21, whichever comes first. If the results are normal, screening should be continued every 2 years until age 30. After age 30, women can safely wait 3 years in between tests if their PAP and HPV tests are both normal.

## If I've had genital warts, does that mean that I will develop cervical cancer?

HPV and genital warts are very common. In most cases they are harmless and cleared by the body naturally. Most people who are infected with HPV will not develop cervical cancer. In some cases, genital warts can be removed in a small surgical procedure. Doctors do this by laser, by freezing them, or by applying topical medications. Ask your provider for more information.

## How is the vaccine given?

The vaccine is given as 3 injections over 6 months. The most common side effects from the vaccine include

local arm pain, swelling and redness at the injection site. It is important for women to have all three injections to get full protection from cervical cancer.

### Additional resources

- CDC resource: [cdc.gov/nip/vaccine/hpv/hpv-faqs.htm](http://cdc.gov/nip/vaccine/hpv/hpv-faqs.htm)
- For more information on HPV or cervical cancer, connect to our Web site at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org). Access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, message boards, healthclasses, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a Directory from your Health Education Center or Department or download a copy at [members.kp.org](http://members.kp.org). (Search "Healthphone".)