Frequently Asked Questions for Patients Concerning HPV Vaccination

What is HPV?
Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of more than 120 different viruses. Some types of HPV are primarily sexually transmitted. One person can spread HPV to another person by genital–genital contact, oral–genital contact, or sexual intercourse. The oral, anal, or genital areas of men and women can become infected. Human papillomavirus types 6 and 11 cause 90% of genital warts. However, 13 additional serious types of HPV have been shown to cause cervical cancer. Of these, HPV types 16 and 18 cause about 70% of all cases of cervical cancer.

Will I know if I have HPV?
Genital warts are a sign of HPV infection. However, an infection of the cervix usually has no symptoms. With no symptoms, an infected person can spread HPV to another person without knowing.

How long do HPV infections last?
The immune system fights most HPV infections and clears them from the body in a few years. Infections that are not cleared from the body are called persistent infections. They may cause precancerous cells and cancer.

Do all women with HPV infection get cervical cancer?
No. In most women, HPV infections are cleared from the body in a few years. For women with persistent infections, regular screening is done with Pap tests. The Pap test looks for cells in the cervix that could be precancerous. This early detection and treatment of precancerous cells can prevent cervical cancer deaths.

What HPV vaccines are currently available?
There are two types of HPV vaccines: bivalent and quadrivalent. The bivalent HPV vaccine is indicated to prevent cervical cancer and cervical intraepithelial neoplasia caused by HPV types 16 and 18. The quadrivalent HPV vaccine is indicated to prevent cancer and intraepithelial neoplasia and genital warts associated with HPV types 6, 11, 16, and 18.

Who should get vaccinated?
Human papillomavirus vaccination is recommended for girls and boys aged 11 years or 12 years. However, the vaccines can be given to children as young as age 9 years. Those who were not vaccinated at the target age can be vaccinated from ages 13 years to 26 years.
Why is HPV vaccination recommended at such young ages?
The HPV vaccines prevent infection, but cannot treat infection. They work best if given before any exposure to HPV infection, which occurs with sexual activity. Also, research shows that the vaccines produce a better immune response when given at younger ages. However, sexually active individuals may still benefit from vaccination because they are unlikely to have been infected with all HPV types that are prevented by the vaccines. Hence, vaccination is recommended up to age 26 years.

What is the recommended timing of the three HPV doses?
Both vaccines are given as shots in the arm in three doses over 6 months.

If I am late for my second or third dose, do I have to start over with all three doses?
No. Even if the time before the second or third dose is longer than recommended, starting over is not necessary. Go and get the next dose, whether it is the second or the third. Complete all three doses, even if the time between doses is longer than recommended.

Can women older than 26 years get vaccinated against HPV?
At this time, HPV vaccination is only approved for ages 9 years to 26 years. The vaccines work best if given before exposure to HPV through sexual activity. Vaccination does not appear to be harmful if given after age 26 years, but it may not be as effective. Many women older than 26 years may already have been exposed to HPV.

Will vaccinating my daughter against HPV encourage her to become sexually active sooner?
Studies show that HPV vaccination is not linked to more or earlier sexual activity.

Are the HPV vaccines safe?
Studies show that both vaccines are very safe and effective. They do not contain live viruses so they cannot cause an HPV infection. The vaccines have been given to millions of people around the world without serious side effects. Common, mild side effects include pain where the shot was given, fever, headache, and nausea. As with all vaccines, the safety of HPV vaccines is monitored carefully.

Do the HPV vaccines work?
The vaccines are highly effective when given before sexual activity begins. They can reduce the chance of developing precancerous cells from HPV types 16 and 18 that are in the vaccines by 100%. This means the risk of cervical cancer is reduced by 70%. It is not 100% because cervical cancer can still be caused by other types of HPV not in the vaccines. This is why getting regular Pap tests is important. The quadrivalent vaccine, which also protects from HPV types 6 and 11, reduces the risk of getting genital warts by 90%.

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