

What is the HPV vaccine?

What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of highly common viruses. There are more than 100 types of HPV, of which 13 are cancer-causing. HPV is transmitted through all kinds of sexual contact, including skin-to-skin genital contact. **Most women and men will be infected** at some point in their life, and many will be infected repeatedly. Many HPV infections have no symptoms. They generally clear up without medical intervention; around 90 percent are cleared from the body within two years.

Cervical Cancer: Quick Facts

- Fourth most common cancer in the world
- Second most common cancer among women
- 85% of fatalities occur in developing countries
- There were an estimated 528,000 cases in 2012
- More than 90% of cases are caused by the human papillomaviruses

If a person is infected with one of the cancer-causing strains, and if this infection does not clear up and goes untreated, then that person is at **risk for cervical cancer**. Note that while HPV is responsible for more than 90 percent of cervical cancer cases, just two strains – **type 16 and 18** – are responsible for approximately 70 percent of cases.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is cancer of the cervix. As men do not have a cervix, **cervical cancer only affects women**. Cervical cancer is **the fourth most common cancer in the world**, and the second leading cause of cancer-related death among women living in less-developed nations.

HPV causes the vast majority of cervical cancer cases. It takes 15 to 20 years for an HPV infection to become cervical cancer. If a woman has a weakened immune system, particularly an untreated HIV infection, progression to cancer can take as little as five to ten years.

There are other factors that either put women at risk of cervical cancer or increase their susceptibility to HPV. **Other factors that put women at risk** of cervical cancer are:

- Early sexual debut
- Many sexual partners
- Unprotected sexual contact
- Exposure to cigar/cigarette smoke, either actively or passively
- Poor immune health (especially HIV infection)
- At least one full-term pregnancy, with the risk increasing the more pregnancies a woman has had

What is the HPV vaccine?

The HPV vaccine is also known as the **cervical cancer vaccine**. It protects against the most dangerous strains of the virus, types 16 and 18. There are two vaccines available. One also protects against HPV types 6 and 11, which cause anogenital warts.

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It is still possible to get cervical cancer even if you have had the HPV vaccine. Women who are sexually active should have regular pap smears to monitor the health of their cervix. HPV is also linked to cancers of the anus, vulva, vagina, and penis. The vaccine therefore helps protect against these less-common cancers.

Who should be vaccinated against HPV?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends vaccinating girls aged nine to thirteen, before they become sexually active. Some countries also vaccinate boys, as they are also at risk for HPV-related genital cancers, and because universal vaccination reduces the overall burden of HPV.

What is the success of HPV vaccination programs?

The vast majority of cervical cancer cases are in developing countries. Unfortunately, amongst the countries participating in this project, none has fully introduced the HPV vaccine. Countries with partial/demonstration use of the vaccine are:

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|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cameroon | <input type="checkbox"/> Kenya | <input type="checkbox"/> Sierra Leone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ghana | <input type="checkbox"/> Madagascar | <input type="checkbox"/> Uganda |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Haiti | <input type="checkbox"/> Malawi | <input type="checkbox"/> Zambia |
| <input type="checkbox"/> India | <input type="checkbox"/> Mali | |

A comprehensive review of HPV vaccine delivery experiences across 37 low- and middle-income countries found that *it is possible to effectively and sustainably*:

- ✓ Reach young adolescent girls with the HPV vaccine
- ✓ Achieve parental acceptance of the vaccine
- ✓ Keep vaccine delivery costs low

For more information on HPV demonstration trials in the above countries, see the interactive map [here](#), or read more in the links below.

For more information

- [Fact sheet on HPV vaccination](#) (WHO)
- [Fact sheet on HPV and cervical cancer](#) (WHO)
- [WHO position paper on human papillomavirus vaccines](#) (WHO)
- [HPV vaccination materials from country programs](#) (Botswana, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia)
- [HPV Vaccine Lessons Learnt](#)
 - [Video overview of lessons learnt](#)
 - [Thematic brief on sustainability](#)
- [Considerations regarding consent in vaccinating children and adolescents between 6 and 17 years old](#) (WHO)
- [Strategies for HPV Vaccination in the Developing World](#) (Cervical Cancer Action)