

HPV Awareness Day -vaccination and screening key to reaching zero cervical cancers

Ahead of International HPV Awareness Day, the Public Health Agency (PHA) is highlighting the importance of both vaccination and cervical screening to help drive down rates of HPV-related cancers.

03 March 2024

4 minutes



Ahead of International HPV Awareness Day [Monday 4 March], the Public Health Agency (PHA) is highlighting the importance of both vaccination and cervical screening to help drive down rates of HPV-related cancers.

The HPV vaccine helps to prevent HPV-related cancers from developing in young people. It is a one dose programme which is offered to pupils in year 9 and given as an injection in the upper arm, the same way as many other vaccines.

In Northern Ireland, cervical screening is available to women and other people with a cervix aged 25–64. This is the age group where screening is of most benefit. Screening is offered every three years if you are aged 25–49, and every five years if you are aged 50–64.

Nearly all cervical cancers are caused by persistent infection with human papillomavirus, known as HPV. Dr Joanne McClean, Director of Public Health at the PHA, said: “We have two very effective ways of reducing cervical cancer – HPV vaccination and cervical screening. By ensuring high uptake of both of these, we can drive down the number of cases of the disease. HPV vaccination helps reduce the chances of developing HPV-related cancers including cervical cancer, and screening aims to detect abnormal changes which may go on to develop into cervical cancer if left untreated. It is important to attend for cervical screening when invited as it could be life-saving.”

HPV is a very common virus – about 8 out of 10 people catch it at some time in their lives. The virus usually causes no symptoms and is mainly spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. In most cases, the body’s immune system will clear the virus and it doesn’t cause any problems, but in some people the virus can stay in the body for many years.

Dr McClean continued: “The HPV vaccine will help protect your child against HPV infection and associated cancers, including over 90% of cervical cancers in women, and cancers of the mouth, throat, anus and genitals in men and women, and against genital warts.

“When a young person receives the vaccine, their body will react by making antibodies that will help the immune system fight HPV infection. The vaccine cannot cause HPV infection or cancer. If you have been eligible for the vaccine but have not received it in school, you can still receive it free of charge until the age of 25. You can find out if you are eligible by contacting your GP surgery.”

The Northern Ireland Cervical Screening Programme introduced full primary HPV testing into the cervical screening pathway last year. The full integration of HPV testing brings

Northern Ireland in line with similar programmes in the rest of the UK and Republic of Ireland, making the screening more accurate and more effective at identifying those at greatest risk.

The screening test, often known as a 'smear test', checks a sample of cells from your cervix for certain types of HPV. If high-risk HPV is detected during screening, the sample will also be checked for abnormal cell changes.

Dr McClean concluded: "Most types of cervical cancer take a long time to develop. By finding cell changes early, screening can help prevent cervical cancer from developing. Checking for HPV as part of the screening programme is a more accurate and effective way to identify women at risk of cell changes that could go on to develop into cancer if left untreated. The smear test takes a couple of minutes and is usually carried out by a nurse who will explain exactly what happens and ensure you feel comfortable throughout.

"Cervical cancer is one of the few cancers that can be prevented thanks to the HPV vaccination programme and screening. We are confident these programmes will enable us to drive down rates of cervical cancer towards zero."

Please see the following websites for further information.

- HPV: www.pha.site/HPVvaccination
- NI Direct – human papillomavirus (HPV): www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/human-papillomavirus-hpv
- Cervical Screening: www.pha.site/CervicalScreening1
- NI Direct – Cervical Screening: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/cervical-screening
- Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust: www.jostrust.org.uk/
- Find out more about the change to primary HPV testing by watching the following animation – www.vimeo.com/892265209?share=copy

ENDS

Share this page

- [Share by email](#)
- [Share on X](#)
- [Share on Facebook](#)
- [Share on LinkedIn](#)
- [Share on WhatsApp](#)
- [Download as PDF](#)