The HPV vaccine

Question and answers for parents of girls and boys aged 12-13

HSC Public Health Agency

This Q&A on the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine supports the leaflet that your child should have been given at school.

Since 2019 the HPV vaccine has been offered to 12-13 year old girls and boys.

Please read this information and then fill in the consent form that came with the booklet and return it to school.

Summary

This information is intended to answer the common questions you may have about the HPV vaccine that will protect your child against HPV infection and associated cancers, including over 70% of cervical cancers (in women) and cancers of the mouth, throat, anus and genitals (in men and women). It will also tell you where you can find more information if you need it.

There are usually no symptoms of HPV infection, so many people won't realise they are infected. Most of the time, the virus does not cause cancer because it is killed off by the body's immune system, but not always – some infections persist and lead to cancer or genital warts – this is why the vaccine is so important.

Since 2008, the HPV vaccine has been offered to all 12-13 year old girls in school years 9 and 10. From September 2019 the vaccine has also been offered to boys in the same way. This is because the evidence is clear that the HPV vaccine helps protect both boys and girls from HPV-related cancers.

If your son or daughter doesn't get the vaccine in Year 9, he or she will be offered it again in Year 10. More information can be found at **pha.site/hpv**

How does HPV cause cancer?

Both men and women can become infected with the HPV virus. It is spread from one person to another during sexual activity (not necessarily sexual intercourse). There are over 100 types of HPV but only a small number of these are known to cause HPV-related cancer.

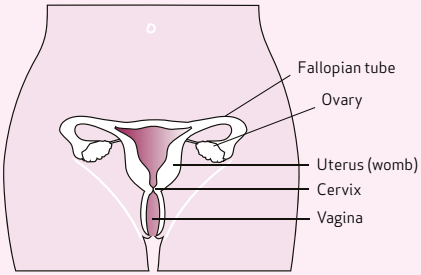
The virus gets into the surface cells of the mouth and throat, vagina, vulva, cervix, penis and anus where it can stay for several years without causing any harm. Then, and for no apparent reason, it may start to cause damage to these cells, which can lead to cancer over time.

The most commonly seen HPV-related cancer is cervical cancer in women with studies showing that the HPV virus is detectable in more than 99% of these cancers. Recent evidence shows that there is also a link between HPV infection and less common cancers of the vulva, vagina, penis, anus, and some cancers of the mouth and throat.

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer affects the cervix – the entrance to the womb (see diagram). There are 13 HPV types that are known to cause cervical cancer and just two – types 16 and 18 – cause 7 out of 10 of the cases.

Each year in Northern Ireland there are around 88 cases of cervical cancer and an average of 22 women die from the disease. In addition, an average of 1,106 cases of cervical cancer in-situ are diagnosed each year. This is where some cells of the cervix have pre-cancerous changes, and equates to a 1 in 10 likelihood of women being diagnosed with cancerous changes in the cervix at some point in their life. If they are left untreated, cancer can develop and may lead to serious illness and death.



Other HPV cancers

Studies now show that HPV types 16 and 18 are also strongly linked to other cancers in men and women. Anal and genital cancers, whilst not as common as cervical cancer in women, are strongly linked to HPV including more than 80% of all anal cancers.

Cancers of the mouth and throat, such as the tongue, tonsils, throat and voice box are also linked to HPV. Studies show that HPV related cancers of the mouth and throat are increasing in the UK, particularly among men and younger people.

How does the HPV vaccine work?

The HPV vaccine protects against several types of HPV infection, including types 16 and 18, which are the two most common types causing cervical and other cancers.

It is given in the same way as other common vaccines as an injection in the upper arm. The body reacts by making antibodies that will help the immune system fight HPV infection. The vaccine cannot cause HPV infection or cancer.

Why is the vaccine being routinely offered to all adolescents aged 12-13 years?

The HPV vaccine is now offered to all 12–13 year olds to protect against several HPV types, including 16 and 18. Types 16 and 18 are the two most common types linked to HPV-related cancers as the evidence is clear that the HPV vaccine helps protect both boys and girls from HPV-related cancers.

HPV is very common and is easily spread through sexual activity. Although it is very unlikely that your son or daughter is at risk of HPV infection at this age, as most are not sexually active until they are much older, it is recommended that they have the vaccine now because studies show that protection from the vaccine is better when it is given at an earlier age.

Does the vaccine protect against other sexually transmitted infections?

The vaccine will also protect against other types of HPV that cause the majority of cases of genital warts. It won't protect against any other sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia and it won't prevent pregnancy. It is therefore still very important that your son or daughter gets safer sex messages at the appropriate time.

Does this mean my daughter will be protected against all cervical cancers?

The vaccine used in Northern Ireland from 2021/22 will protect against nine types of virus that cause 95% of all cervical cancers. The vaccine **won't** protect against any of the remaining cervical cancer-causing types.

This is why it is vital that women still go for routine cervical screening (smear tests) when they are old enough (25 years), even if they received the vaccine. The purpose of cervical screening is to detect early precancerous changes in the cervix that cause no symptoms but go on to develop into cancer. If changes are detected early enough they can be treated to prevent cervical cancer developing.

HPV infection is also associated with cancers of the vulva, vagina, anus, mouth and throat. There are currently no screening programmes for these cancers and it is important to contact your GP about any symptoms or concerns.

Will my son now be protected against all other cancers?

The vaccine will protect against the two main virus types (types 16 and 18) that cause some cancers of the penis, anus, mouth and throat. It is important to note that the vaccine won't protect against all of these types of cancers. There are currently no screening programmes for other HPV-related cancers. If you are worried about any symptoms contact your GP.

How long does the vaccine protection last for?

Studies have shown that vaccinated people maintain high levels of protection for at least 12 years, with no evidence of protection decreasing. Data from clinical trials and ongoing research tell us that the protection provided by HPV vaccine will provide life time protection from these viruses because the immune system develops antibodies to the virus after the vaccination. No boosters are required at present.

Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. For more than 10 years the safety of the HPV vaccine has been strictly monitored and frequently reviewed by many international bodies including:

- The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulation Agency (MHRA UK);
- the European Medicines Agency (EMA);
- the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety.

These international bodies have continually reported that the vaccine is safe with no known long-term side effects. The WHO listed 121 countries using HPV vaccine around the world (2018). Over 10.5 million doses have been given in the UK since 2008, and more than 80 million people have been vaccinated worldwide.

"The World Health Organization strongly recommends HPV vaccine to prevent cervical cancer."

Robb Butler, Head of Immunisation, World Health Organization, Europe

When will my child have the vaccination?

You should have received a consent form along with this booklet. It is important that the consent form is signed and returned to the school promptly. Your son or daughter will be offered the HPV vaccine during the current academic year in Year 9. They will also be offered it again in Year 10 if they missed it the year before. Those over 16 years of age are presumed to be capable of self-consenting unless there are specific reasons otherwise.

How will the vaccine be given?

The school health team from your local Health and Social Care Trust will give the vaccine. The person giving the vaccination will be fully qualified to do it and will know how to deal with any problems that may arise. The vaccine will be given in the upper arm by a nurse. For the vaccine to work two injections will be needed. The first dose is usually given in Year 9 and the second dose 6-12 months later. However, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has indicated that the interval between the first and second dose can be extended by a number of years without compromising protection or the boosting effect of the second dose. It's important that your son or daughter has both vaccinations to be fully protected.

If your son or daughter is aged 15 years or over at the time of the first dose, he or she will need three injections, ideally within a 12 month period. The second dose will be given around a month after the first dose, and a final dose is given around six months after the first dose. This is because the research hasn't shown two doses to be as good as three doses in this age group.

Will our GP know that my child has had the HPV vaccination?

Information about the HPV vaccination will be transferred to your GP's surgery so it can be entered on your son or daughter's health record.

Will there be any side effects?

The side effects are generally mild – mostly soreness, swelling and redness where the injection is generally given in the arm, which soon wears off. Other less common side effects may include headache, nausea, dizziness and/or mild fever. These can be treated with paracetamol or ibuprofen. Occasionally, individuals may faint after getting an injection. They are advised to sit down for 10-15 minutes after the vaccination. This helps prevent fainting.

Very rarely, some people have an allergic reaction soon after immunisation. This reaction may be a rash or itching affecting part or all of the body. The nurse will know how to treat this. It is not a reason to withhold further HPV vaccinations.

Even more rarely, people can have a severe reaction within a few minutes of the injection with breathing difficulties and collapse. This is called an anaphylactic reaction. It is extremely rare and the nurse is trained to deal with it.

Individuals recover completely with treatment, usually within a few hours. If you would like more information about the vaccine, the Patient Information Leaflet (PIL) for Gardasil can be found at: www.medicines.org.uk/emc

Type "Gardasil" into the search box.

Parents can report suspected side effects of vaccines through the Yellow Card Scheme. This can be done online by visiting https://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk or calling 0800 731 6789 (10am to 2pm Monday-Friday only).

What about people who have allergies or other medical conditions, can they still have the HPV vaccination?

Yes. Food intolerances, asthma, eczema, hay fever, and allergies generally do not prevent someone from having this vaccine. If you have any concerns about this, speak to the school health team or your GP before your son or daughter has the vaccine.

Will the vaccine affect any other medication?

There is no evidence that the vaccine reduces the effectiveness of any medication.

What if my child is off school ill on the day of the vaccination?

The school health team will arrange for the vaccine to be offered at another time.

What if my child has already been sexually active?

If an individual has been sexually active, there is a possibility that he or she may have already caught HPV. However, as it won't be known which type of the virus they may be infected with, he or she should still have the vaccine as it may still give protection.

What do I do if I think my daughter is pregnant?

There is no known risk associated with giving the HPV vaccine during pregnancy. However, as a matter of precaution, the HPV vaccine is not recommended in pregnancy. This is not because of any specific safety concerns with giving the HPV vaccine during pregnancy but because there is limited information on using the vaccine during pregnancy. If your daughter finds out she is pregnant soon after she has been given the HPV vaccine, this should be discussed with her GP. Your daughter should complete her pregnancy before finishing the appropriate vaccination schedule.

What if my child doesn't want to have the vaccination?

The HPV vaccine is recommended for all the reasons given above and will protect them for many years into the future. However, if your son or daughter is really sure that they do not want to receive it they don't have to but they may want to talk about it with a health professional before deciding. If your son or daughter wants more information, he or she should speak to the school health team – on their own, or with you, if he or she would prefer.

What if my child wants the vaccination but, as parents, we would rather he or she didn't have it?

The HPV vaccine is recommended for all the reasons given above and will protect them for many years into the future. It is important for your child's future to appreciate that having the vaccination now will protect him or her from certain cancers associated with the HPV infection for many years to come. This is particularly important for girls as HPV infection is the main cause of cervical cancer. You should discuss this with your child and the school health team to get more information. It is important to note though that the decision is legally your child's as long as he or she understands the issues in giving consent.

For more information see pha.site/hpv

HSC Public Health Agency

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