

Frequently asked questions about human papillomavirus (HPV)

Infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV) significantly increases the risk of developing cervical cancer later in life. There is no treatment for the virus itself, but there are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause.

What is HPV?

HPV (human papillomavirus) is a common sexually transmitted infection, which affects most people at some point in their lives. There are many different types of HPV. Some types cause health problems including genital warts and cancers. But there is a vaccine that can prevent these health problems.



Who can get HPV?

Both women and men who are sexually active can get HPV. The most common mode of transmission is through sex, but it can also be transmitted through any form of skin-to-skin contact and from mother to child. HPV can be passed even when an infected person has no signs or symptoms.



Is it possible to tell if a person has HPV just by looking at them?

No. The HPV infection cannot be seen and, in most cases, there are no visible signs.

I am pregnant. Will having HPV affect my pregnancy?

If you are pregnant and have HPV, you can get genital warts or develop abnormal cell changes on your cervix. Abnormal cell changes can be found with routine cervical cancer screening. You should undergo routine cervical cancer screening even when you are pregnant.



Are HPV and HIV the same?

No. HPV should not be confused with HIV. They are both viruses, but they are completely different in how they affect the human body.



Does HPV cause cancer?

HPV can cause cervical cancer and other cancers including cancer of the vulva, penis, or anus. It can also cause cancer in the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils.

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer that affects the cervix, which is the lower part (known as the mouth) of the womb. According to the South African Medical Research Council, cervical cancer is the leading cause of cancer among women aged 15 to 44 years in South Africa. Cancer is when abnormal cells in the human body start to grow very quickly and cannot be controlled by normal body processes. Over time, normal cells are replaced by cancer cells, and without early diagnosis and treatment the person may die.



How can you confirm if a person has cervical cancer?

This depends on what is called the stage of the disease. Women with early stage cancer may not experience any signals of disease. In these cases, a special test is required to detect if a person has early signs of developing cervical cancer, called a Pap smear. The cells from the cervix are collected and sent to a laboratory for testing and confirmation. In the later and progressive stages of the disease, women may start experiencing abnormal bleeding, vaginal discharge, bleeding after intercourse, and loss of control of urine.



Has the HPV vaccine been thoroughly tested and used before?

The HPV vaccine is safe and most effective when provided from age nine or before girls become sexually active. In South Africa, the HPV vaccination was approved by the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority in 2008 for its efficacy and safety.



How safe and effective is the vaccine?

The HPV vaccine used in South Africa is very safe and effective in preventing the HPV-16 and HPV-18 strains of the virus. The HPV vaccine offers hope to us all for a world free from cervical cancer, and HPV infection can be reduced if herd immunity is achieved using the vaccine.



Will I get HPV infection from the HPV vaccine?

No. The vaccine is non-infectious, and you will not get HPV infection through vaccination.

What is the school-based HPV vaccination campaign?

The Western Cape Department of Health together with the Western Cape Education Department introduced bi-annual HPV vaccination campaigns in schools in 2014 as this is part of the Integrated School Health Programme. Nurses are visiting public schools to vaccinate Grade 5 girls.



Who is going to be vaccinated during this campaign?

Grade 5 girls in public schools and girls in special schools, with the necessary consent, who are nine years old and older will be vaccinated.

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Why are only Grade 5 girls being vaccinated during this campaign?

This vaccine is most effective if provided before sexual debut and is registered for use in boys and girls from the age of nine. As the entry requirement for Grade 1 is 7 years, most girls in Grade 5 will be between 9 and 10 years old. Therefore, Grade 5 has been identified as the most suitable grade to commence the vaccination.



Why are boys not given the HPV vaccine?

In an ideal world, both girls and boys should receive HPV vaccination, to ensure that fewer people are infected with HPV (herd immunity). However, due to limited resources, this campaign is currently limited to women.



Why should girls be vaccinated against HPV?

The HPV vaccine is important to protect against HPV infection that could lead to cervical cancer later in life.

How many doses of the HPV vaccine are needed?

Two doses (a minimum of five months apart) are offered free of charge to girls over the age of nine in special schools or in Grade 5 to be fully protected.



What are the side effects of the HPV vaccine?

As with all vaccinations, some girls may experience some bruising or redness at the vaccination site.

Do the girls need consent from their parents or caregivers to be vaccinated?

Yes. Parents or caregivers need to provide signed consent for the vaccination of the girls. For consent to be valid, it must be informed, understood and voluntary, and the person consenting must have the capacity to make the decision. Girls who are 12 years and older may agree for themselves.



Where is the HPV vaccination campaign going to be conducted?

The HPV vaccination will be administered in public schools across the province.



Who will be conducting the vaccination?

Trained teams of healthcare workers will be administering the vaccination.



If a girl or woman does not meet the criteria to receive the HPV vaccination, what can be done to protect her from cervical cancer?

She can visit a private practitioner and request a prescription for the HPV vaccination. If she is already at risk of having contracted HPV, it is recommended that she has routine screening tests.

For any enquiries, please contact us on:

Western Cape Government Contact Centre: 0860 142 142 (8:00 to 20:00)
HPV website: www.westerncape.gov.za/general-publication/hpv-vaccinations