



PapScreen
Victoria

information

A vaccine to prevent cervical cancer

Some types of the human papilloma virus (HPV) have been linked to cervical cancer. A vaccine is now available to protect against two types of HPV that cause around 70% of cervical cancers.

What is the human papilloma virus (HPV)?

HPV is so common that it could be considered a normal part of being sexually active. The virus is passed on by sexual contact and is very common in women who have ever had sex. Four out of five women will have HPV at some time in their lives and most will never know it. The body's immune system usually clears the virus itself. This takes about one to two years.

However sometimes the body is not able to clear HPV. We now know that long-term infection with certain types of HPV (including HPV 16 and 18) can increase a woman's risk of cervical cancer.

What is the cervical cancer vaccine?

There are two cervical cancer vaccines that are produced by two different drug companies. They are called Gardasil, which is manufactured by CSL Biotherapies, and Cervarix, which is produced by Glaxo Smith Kline Limited (GSK).

Both vaccines protect against HPV types 16 and 18, which cause around 70% of cervical cancers. Gardasil also protects against HPV types 6 and 11, which cause up to 90% of genital warts.

Both vaccines are given as a series of three injections over a six-month period. The optimum schedule for receiving the three doses is at 0, 2 and 4 month stages.

Who can have the vaccine?

Gardasil is approved for use by females aged 9 to 45 and males aged 9 to 15. There have been many clinical studies in females that have established the vaccine's effectiveness. However, clinical studies in males are continuing.

Cervarix is approved for use in females aged 10 to 45.

The vaccine works best if given to females before they are exposed to HPV. That is, before the start of sexual activity. It is recommended that girls have the vaccine around the ages of 9 to 12.

Women who have had sex may benefit from the vaccine, however the benefit may be reduced. This is because it is highly likely that they have

already been exposed to one or more HPV type(s) covered by the vaccine.

How can I get the vaccine?

All girls in Year 7 can access the vaccine free of charge through the school-based National Immunisation Program.

The Australian government's free catch-up program for young women aged 18 to 26 has now finished.

Females aged 12 to 45 should access the vaccine from their general practitioner or immunisation clinic at a cost of \$450 plus any consultation fees for all three doses.

Should women still have regular Pap tests?

Yes. All women who have ever had sex need to continue having two-yearly Pap tests. This is their best chance to prevent cervical cancer. Even young girls who are vaccinated will need to have Pap tests when they're older. This is because the vaccine does not protect against all types of cancer-causing HPV. It is effective against two specific types of HPV that cause up to 70% of cervical cancers. Therefore, Pap tests are still important.

What is a Pap test?

The Pap test is a quick and simple test that checks for changes to the cells of the cervix. Abnormal changes are most likely to be minor changes that will disappear by themselves, or they can be easily treated before they become more serious. If changes are not detected and monitored, in some cases the abnormality may develop into cervical cancer.

It is important that all women aged between 18 and 70 who have ever had sex have a Pap test every two years.

Women who have questions about Pap tests, HPV or cervical cancer can ring the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20.

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PapScreen Victoria is the Victorian component of the National Cervical Screening Program and is coordinated by the Department of Human Services. Cancer Council Victoria delivers PapScreen's education and communications initiatives.