

HPV vaccine fact sheet for students

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. There are many different types of HPV.

Genital HPV is a very common sexually transmitted infection in males and females with around eight in 10 people being infected at some point in their lives. It usually causes no symptoms and goes away by itself, but can sometimes cause serious illness.

What does HPV have to do with cancer?

Genital HPV infection can cause some cancers including cancer of the cervix, vulva and vagina in females and cancer of the penis in males. It can also cause cancers of the anus and mouth/throat, and genital warts in both males and females.

How do people get HPV?

HPV is passed on from one person to another through intimate genital-skin contact, usually without the person ever knowing it. The virus enters the body through tiny breaks in the skin. You can be exposed to HPV the first time sexual activity occurs, from only one sexual partner.

You may not be thinking about being sexually active yet, however the vaccine works best if it is given before exposure to HPV – that is, before sexual activity starts.

About the HPV vaccine

A vaccine has been developed that can protect you against 90% of cervical cancers, most of the genital cancers in males caused by HPV infection and 90% of genital warts in both females and males.

For people aged 14 and under, the vaccine is given as two injections in the upper arm, six to 12 months apart. It's very safe. The HPV vaccine was carefully tested before it was introduced. Over 270 million doses have been given safely around the world.

The vaccine works best when given at a younger age. Research shows that younger people create more antibodies to the vaccine than those aged in their late teens. This means by having the vaccine at age 12–13 you are better protected if you are exposed to HPV in the future.

If you're aged 15 or over when you get your first dose, or if you don't receive the injections at least six months apart, you will need three injections. Ideally, the three doses should be given at 0, 2 and 6 months – that is, the second dose should be given two months after the first, and the third dose four months after the second.

Who can have the vaccine?

Girls *and* boys aged 12–13 can have the vaccine free of charge at school as part of the National HPV Vaccination Program.

The secondary school year the vaccine is given in varies across Australia. Usually it's offered in the first year of secondary school. Your parents or guardian can contact your local immunisation provider or doctor.

If you're outside of these age ranges, ask your doctor or school nurse for advice about the HPV vaccine and whether it's right for you.

Why should I consider having the vaccine?

Having the HPV vaccine means you are far less likely to develop HPV-related cancers and disease in the future.

Cancer Council and important health groups such as the World Health Organization all agree that having the vaccine is a good idea.

How can I have the vaccine?

Under the school-based program, students eligible for the free vaccine will receive a consent card.

Your parent or guardian must sign this form and return it to the school before you can be vaccinated. If you and your parents/guardian agree that you should not have the vaccine, they need to note this on the form and return it to school.

The vaccine is also available from your doctor.

What if I miss a dose of the vaccine?

Any missed dose at school can be obtained from your doctor. In some states missed doses are offered at your school.

Tips for a stress-free vaccination day

- Wear short sleeves on the day if possible so the nurse can give you the vaccine in your upper arm easily.
- If you feel nervous, ask your teacher if you can go first, to get it out of the way.
- Make sure you have a good breakfast on the days when you have the vaccine.
- It's best to avoid too much exercise on the days you have the vaccine.
- After the vaccine most people feel fine. But if you don't feel well, make sure you tell the nurse, a teacher or your parents/guardians.

More information: Speak to your parents or school to find out more. Visit www.hpvvaccine.org.au.