

HPV Vaccination: What You Need to Know

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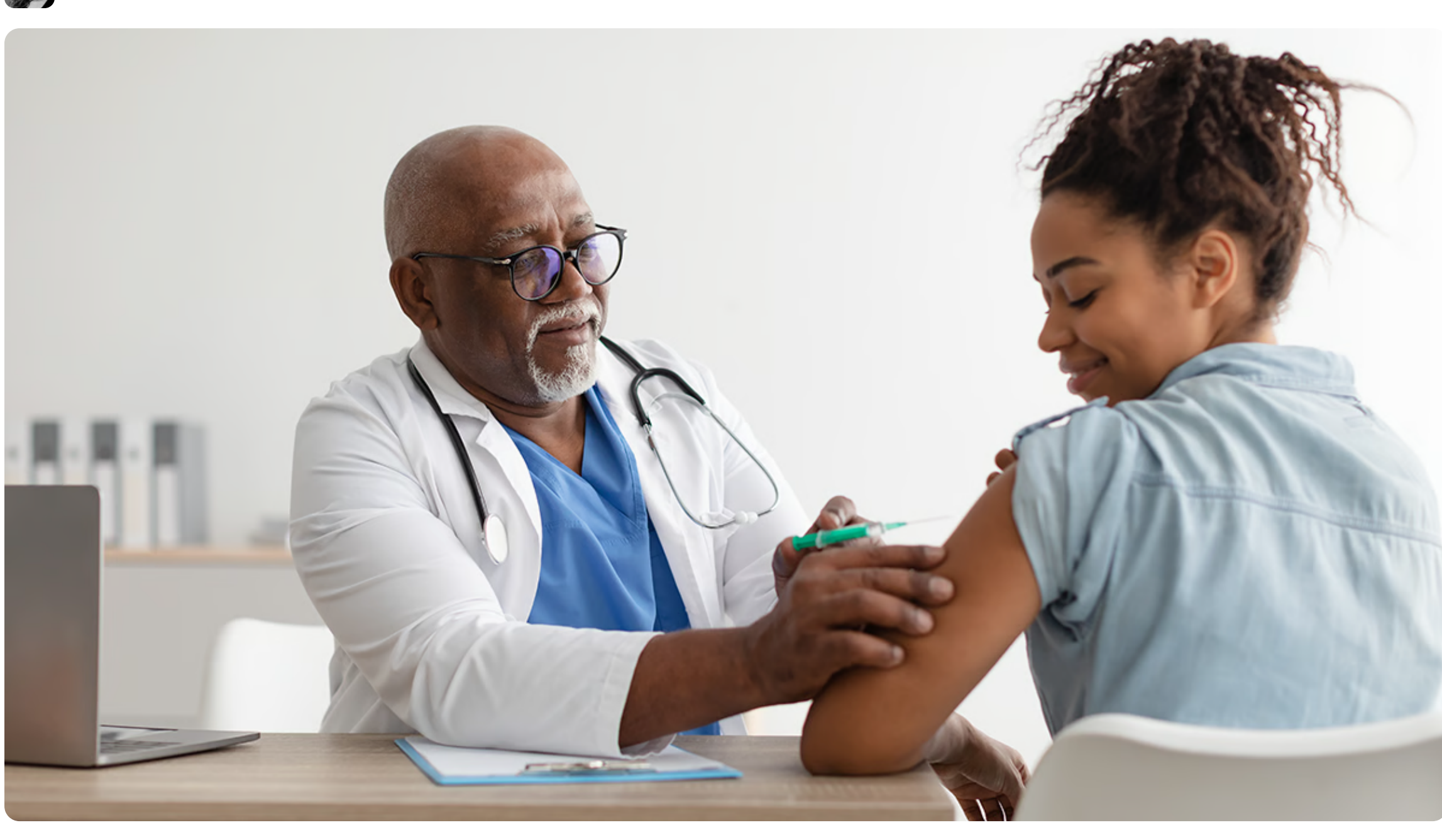


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Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the United States. Nearly everyone becomes infected with HPV within the first few months or years of becoming sexually active.

There are numerous types of HPV, and some can cause health problems like **warts and cervical, genital, and throat cancers**. However, the HPV vaccine is an effective way of protecting you against HPV and subsequent health complications. In this article, we explore HPV vaccines and how they support your health.

What is HPV?

[Human papillomavirus or HPV](#) is a **group of common DNA viruses** that can infect both men and women. The word 'papilloma' means small wart-like growth.

HPV is a large family of **over 200 related viruses**. Infection can spread through **penetrative and non-penetrative sex**, including **vaginal**, anal, or oral sex. HPV is **not transmitted through blood or body fluids** like semen. Instead, infections result from intimate and direct skin-to-skin contact as HPV lives in the skin's surface layers.

Doctors classify HPV infections as **low-risk** and unlikely to cause disease and **high-risk**, which are associated with pre-cancer and cancer.

Around 50% of HPV infections are high-risk types such as HPV16 and HPV18. Although the immune system usually controls HPV, if an infection persists, it can trigger abnormal cell changes. **Left untreated, this can lead to cancers including:**

- Cervical.
- Anus.
- Penis.
- Vaginal.
- Vulva.
- Head, neck, and throat.

In the United States, high-risk HPVs cause **3% of all cancers in women and 2% of all cancers in men**. Additionally, high-risk HPVs cause around 5% of all cancers worldwide, with an estimated 570,000 women and 60,000 men developing HPV-related cancer annually. Thankfully, HPV vaccination is an effective way of reducing this risk.

Does HPV infection cause symptoms?

Often, HPV infection causes no symptoms or health problems. However, some individuals find out they have HPV because they **develop genital warts**. A cervical cancer screening may also reveal **abnormal cells**, but in some cases, a person may not know they have HPV until they develop cancer.

Most people with HPV don't know they have an HPV infection, and there is no test to find out someone's HPV status.

Can HPV be treated?

Doctors cannot treat HPV, but they can address some of the health issues it causes. If the infection has no symptoms, the body's immune system usually clears HPV within 1-2 years.

Genital HPV warts in the anogenital areas or mouth can be treated with medications including:

- **Salicylic acid.** An over-the-counter treatment that gradually removes thin layers of the wart's surface.
- **Imiquimod.** A prescription cream that boosts the immune system's ability to fight HPV.
- **Podofilox.** A topical prescription that eliminates genital wart tissue.
- **Trichloroacetic acid.** A chemical that burns away warts.

If these medications don't work, a doctor may recommend freezing off warts with liquid nitrogen or surgical removal.

There are also treatments to remove abnormal cells in the cervix, including:

- Cryosurgery using liquid nitrogen.
- Surgical removal using a laser or scalpel.
- Loop electrosurgical excision procedure (LEEP) that uses a thin, electrically charged wire to remove a thin layer of cells.
- Cold knife conization that removes a cone-shaped piece of the cervix.

Should someone develop HPV-related cancer, it's important to note that it's **more treatable when found early**. For this reason, regular screening for cervical cancer is essential. You should also see a doctor if you notice any skin or mucosal changes or abnormalities.

Overall, it's always better to prevent rather than treat infections whenever possible.

Is the HPV vaccination effective?

Yes, the HPV vaccine is **highly effective**. A large clinical study of [nearly 1.7 million](#) women demonstrated a nearly 90% reduction in cervical cancer incidence among those vaccinated before age 17.

The HPV vaccine Gardasil 9 effectively protects against infection from two low-risk HPV types that cause genital warts and seven high-risk HPV types that cause the majority of HPV-related cancers.

Who should get the vaccine?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) **recommend that all children receive the vaccine at age 11 or 12**, although vaccination can begin at age 9. Vaccination offers the most protection at this age when exposure to HPV is minimal.

Both males and females should get vaccinated as everyone is at risk of HPV-associated cancers. Although cervical cancer is one that affects women, men can also develop penile, oral, and anal cancers. Vaccination also reduces the spread of HPV to others.

What is the vaccine schedule?

Vaccination in children **consists of** an initial dose and a second dose 6 to 12 months later.

Young adults aged 15 or older require three doses of vaccine to be fully protected. The vaccine series consists of an initial dose, a second dose 1 to 2 months later, and a final dose at month 6.

Can the HPV vaccine be given at older ages?

Yes, recommendations include adults up to age 26. Generally, **catch-up HPV vaccination isn't recommended** for anyone over 26 years as they are more likely to have been exposed to HPV already, so the public health benefits are minimal.

However, doctors may still advise vaccination in people who are not adequately vaccinated and who may be at risk from a new HPV infection.

Does the HPV vaccine offer benefits to someone already sexually active?

Yes, it does because there are multiple strains of HPV. Therefore, even if someone has an infection with one type, vaccination can still protect them from the others.

However, vaccinations **do not treat existing HPV infections**. They can only protect you from the types of HPV you haven't been exposed to already.

Does the HPV vaccine carry any health risks or side effects?

Overall, the **HPV vaccine is safe and carries minimal risks**. Most people experience no side effects, and if they do, they are usually mild, including soreness, swelling, or redness at the injection site.

Sometimes people may feel **dizzy or faint following** vaccination but should recover quickly. Also, you could experience headaches, nausea, or weakness in some cases.

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