

HPV Vaccination

First, let's get through some basic science...

[HPV \(Human Papilloma Virus\)](#) is a virus which will infect 85-90% of sexually active men and women at some point in their lives ([CDC](#)). HPV causes Genital Warts, as well as a variety of different types of cancer. Because it is the most common, I'll concentrate on Cervical Cancer.

Once infected with HPV, the cells of the cervix change their appearance and growth patterns (a.k.a. "Dysplasia"). [Cervical dysplasia](#), if left unchecked, can eventually become [Cervical Cancer](#) – this is why you will sometimes hear dysplasia referred to as "Pre-Cancer". When you get your Pap smear, what we are looking for is evidence of dysplasia. When it is found, it can usually be treated before it becomes cancer.

In 2006, the first vaccine against HPV was approved by the FDA ([AAP](#)); several updated versions have become available since then. This means that we now have tools to help prevent HPV infection in the first place. The ideal time to receive a vaccine that prevents a sexually-transmitted disease is before becoming sexually active, so the vaccine is approved for people as young as 9 (although typically recommended at ages 11-12). It is given in 2-3 doses (depending on your age), and protects against those types of the HPV virus which are responsible for most cervical cancers. Since no vaccine can protect against all the different types of HPV virus (there are 12-14 known cancer-causing types), it is still recommended to continue regular Pap smears even if you've received the vaccine.

A quick Google search will reveal multiple stories of negative side effects to the HPV vaccine. There are 2 things you need to remember:

1. You won't see people commenting on their "positive" experiences with HPV vaccination. By far, the most common experience with the HPV vaccine is 3 injections with a very small needle and no side effects. Essentially, a "positive" experience means nothing happened. That makes for pretty dull reading.
2. Vaccines should be considered in the same way as any prescribed therapy. They have their benefits, and their risks. The main benefit of HPV vaccination is a decreased chance of getting cervical cancer. The risks are actually similar to any vaccine currently on the market. Most are mild and self-limiting side effects (such as a sore arm or low-grade fever, for example).

[Talk to your gynecologist](#) about the HPV vaccines currently available, and whether you are a candidate.