



# The HPV vaccine

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## Starting this fall, all grade

6 and 9 girls in BC schools will be offered a vaccine that could save them from cervical cancer in the future. Sounds like a pretty good idea, especially after you find out the details.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually-transmitted infection that will infect three out of four sexually active women in their lifetimes. The virus lives in mucous membranes such as those in the genital area or on the skin. It often shows up as genital warts, though they may not appear for weeks or months after sexual contact with an infected person who may not even know he or she is responsible for transmission of HPV.

There are about 100 varieties of HPV, most of which clear up on their own. However, there are some that are associated with cervical cancer; this is where the vaccination program is targeted. Among women aged 20 to 40 years, cervical cancer is the second most common form of cancer. And with no cure for HPV, prevention is especially important.

The HPV vaccination program to be launched in the coming school year is being done on the advice of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, the provincial health officer, health authorities, the BC Cancer Agency, BC Women's and BC Children's hospitals among others.

The vaccine to be used is Gardasil. It is being used in 93 countries, from Australia and New Zealand to the US to most European and Scandinavian countries. Though it may appear to some people that there was

a rush to introduction, it turns out that this vaccine is the single most studied of any vaccine ever licensed. Clinical trials involving about 20,000 girls and women aged 16 to 26 have shown it to be safe with only rare allergic reactions.

Gardasil protects against two types of HPV, the two that cause 70% of cervical cancer; it is almost 100% effective against these two strains. Gardasil also protects against two other strains that cause 90% of cases of genital warts.

As with any vaccine, the accomplishment is preventing an infection, not curing a pre-existing one. After all, what good is a flu shot after you got the flu? Same goes for HPV infections. This brings us to why the vaccine is being offered to grade 6 girls (grade 9s will be offered as a 'catch-up' for three years). Since HPV is transmitted sexually, immunization before sexual activity begins is ideal.

The HPV vaccination program offers free protection to girls and young women in BC schools. It will be provided as a series of three shots in the arm over six months. This should protect her for life, but over the years, ongoing evaluation will determine if any boosters are needed.

You can learn more about the program from your public health nurse, family doctor or on the ImmunizeBC website at [www.immunizebc.ca](http://www.immunizebc.ca). You can also preview the video that will be shown in schools at [www.phsa.ca/phsa/imvideos/HPV\\_web.wmv](http://www.phsa.ca/phsa/imvideos/HPV_web.wmv).

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