

## Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) Vaccine

The information in this factsheet will help you understand more about the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine. It is an agreed view by medical experts on this virus and its prevention. We hope it answers some of your questions. If you have any other questions or concerns, please ask your GP or call the National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700.

### What is the human papilloma virus (HPV)?

The human papilloma virus is a very common infection of the cervix. There are up to 100 types of HPV and most do not cause any problems.

- The high-risk types include HPV 16 and 18. These cause cervical cancer.
- The low-risk types include HPV 6 and 11. These can cause genital warts.

### How am I infected with HPV?

HPV is a virus that is passed on by direct skin contact during sex. The virus is very common. Most sexually active women are exposed to the virus. Eight out of 10 women become infected with HPV in their lifetime.

The virus does not cause any problems for most women. Often they are unaware they have it as it has no symptoms. For most women the virus disappears naturally over time.

### What happens if I cannot get rid of the virus?

A small number of women have difficulty getting rid of the HPV virus. This may happen if you smoke. Ongoing HPV infections can cause abnormal changes in the cells lining the cervix. These abnormal changes in the cells are known as **cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN)**. The only way that these changes can be found is by doing a smear test. These cells are not cancerous but are called precancerous because if left untreated for a number of years they can develop into cancer.

### What is cancer of the cervix?

The cervix is found deep inside your vagina at the neck of your womb. Cervical cancer is a cancer of the cells that line the cervix. Cervical cancer develops slowly over a number of years. There is strong evidence that ongoing HPV infections are linked to most cervical cancers. Other skin cancers of the vagina and vulva are also linked with ongoing HPV infection.

## What are the risk factors for cervical cancer?

A risk factor is anything that increases your chance of getting a disease. HPV and smoking are the most important risk factors for developing cervical cancer.

Smoking in particular increases your risk of getting cervical cancer. If you smoke, cigarettes can affect how the cervix fights infection. For this reason, you can have trouble getting rid of HPV if you smoke.

Another risk is not having regular smears. Regular smear tests can find abnormal cells early and treat them and so prevent cervical cancer.

## What is a vaccine?

A vaccine helps your body's immune system to recognise and fight viruses or infections by making antibodies. These antibodies will then protect you from getting an infection or virus.

**HPV vaccines can prevent 7 out of 10 cervical cancers.**

## Why should I be vaccinated?

The vaccine will make antibodies that will protect you against many HPV types.

## Who should be vaccinated?

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) looked at the best way to start a vaccination programme in Ireland. They recommend that all girls aged 12 years of age should receive the vaccine. A National

Cervical Vaccination Programme is planned but has not yet started up.

The vaccine is licensed for girls and women aged 9–26. But it is proven to work best for girls and women who have not been exposed to the virus.

## How is the vaccine given?

The vaccine is injected into a muscle, usually in your upper arm or thigh. Three separate doses are needed. The second and third doses are given two months and six months after the first dose.

## What about older girls, women or boys?

- **Older girls:** The vaccine works best if given before older girls are exposed to HPV.
- **Adult women:** The vaccine has not been proven to work well in women who have already been exposed to the virus. In this case, cervical screening is the best way to reduce your risk of cervical cancer. It will help to protect you if you have not been vaccinated.
- **Boys/men:** Some countries have licensed the vaccine for both boys and girls. But there is not enough evidence for the use of the vaccine in boys. It is not recommended as part of the National Cervical Vaccination Programme.





### Does the vaccine protect me fully from cervical cancer?

The vaccine does not protect you against **all** types of HPV. The vaccine targets the main HPV types. If you have been exposed to the virus already, the vaccine may not protect you.

### If I'm vaccinated, will I need a smear test?

Yes. The vaccine against HPV reduces your risk of cervical cancer but does not remove it. So it is important that all women, aged 25 to 60, continue to have regular cervical smear tests. Before having the vaccine, discuss this with your GP.

**All women, aged 25 to 60, should continue to have cervical screening.**

In Ireland, a national cervical screening programme began in 2008 called CervicalCheck. The Government funds this programme and provides free smear tests to women aged 25 to 60. You can choose to have a free smear test from any

smeartaker (doctor or nurse) registered with CervicalCheck.

For more details about this service in your area, contact CervicalCheck at 1800 45 45 55 or visit [www.cervicalcheck.ie](http://www.cervicalcheck.ie)

### How long will the vaccine protect me?

It is believed that the vaccine will protect you for at least 5 years. Research continues to see if it can last longer than that.

### Is the vaccine safe?

Yes. Both vaccines have been well tolerated by women. There have been no serious side-effects. Mild to moderate reactions can happen at the injection site. These include redness, swelling or itchiness at the site. Less common reactions may be nausea, fatigue and headaches.

### What vaccines are licensed?

In Ireland there are two vaccines licensed to prevent HPV infections: Gardasil™ and Cervarix™.

- Both vaccines target HPV types 16 and 18.
- Gardasil™ also targets HPV types 6 and 11.
- The vaccines are given as a course of three injections over a 6-month period.
- The vaccines works best when all three doses have been given and the course is complete.

## Information factsheet on HPV vaccine

### Further information

More information on HPV, cervical screening or cervical cancer is available from the Irish Cancer Society. There are also two free booklets available: *Understanding Smear Test Results* and *Understanding Cancer of the Cervix*.



For more information about HPV, cervical screening or cervical cancer, call the National Cancer Helpline  
Freefone

**1800 200 700**

(Monday–Friday, 9am–7pm;  
Friday 9am–5pm) or email  
**helpline@irishcancer.ie**

for confidential advice from our cancer nurse specialists.

**Irish Cancer Society**  
**43/45 Northumberland Road**  
**Dublin 4**

Tel: (01) 231 0500

Fax: (01) 231 0555

Email: [helpline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:helpline@irishcancer.ie)

Website: [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

### Some useful organisations

#### **CervicalCheck – National Cervical Screening Programme**

PO Box 161

Limerick

Freefone 1800 45 45 55

Email: [info@cervicalcheck.ie](mailto:info@cervicalcheck.ie)

Website: [www.cervicalcheck.ie](http://www.cervicalcheck.ie)

#### **Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA)**

Webworks Building

Eglinton Street

Cork

Tel: 021 425 0610

Email: [info@hiqa.ie](mailto:info@hiqa.ie)

Website: [www.hiqa.ie](http://www.hiqa.ie)

#### **Dept of Health and Children**

Hawkins House

Hawkins Street

Dublin 2

Tel: 01 635 4000

Website: [www.dohc.ie](http://www.dohc.ie)

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