

The HPV vaccine: One more decision for teens to make

Should I take calculus in high school? *Do I want to buy that shirt at the mall — or should I save my money?* *Am I ready to go away to university?* CAN I WORK PART-TIME AND STILL KEEP UP WITH SCHOOL? *Do I really want to go to the prom? Who should I hang out with?* **Can I wait to do my science project until next week, or should I just get it done now?** *Should I focus on the swim team or debating?* Do I go along with my friends, or speak out? *Am I ready to date — and how far do I want to go?*

If you're a teenager, you have lots of decisions to make. Some of those decisions are easy, and some take a little more thought.

And now, you have one more decision to make: should you get the HPV vaccine?

HPV stands for Human Papillomavirus. It's a virus that comes in many types. HPV is spread through sexual activity, and it's really common. In fact, most people who have ever had sex have been exposed to it. It's very hard to prevent getting HPV, even if you use condoms.

Most of the time, your body will fight — and beat — an HPV infection. But sometimes, some types of HPV can cause genital warts in guys and girls. Other types may, over time, lead to cervical cancer in women.

Now, a new HPV vaccine can protect girls and women against the two types of HPV that most commonly cause genital warts, and the two types that most commonly lead to cervical cancer. Girls and young women between the ages of 9 and 26 can get the vaccine, but the best time to get it is between the ages of 9 and 13 — or before you're sexually active.

For some teens, deciding to get the HPV vaccine is a no-brainer.

“My mom had a cervical cancer scare last year,” says Katherine, 17, who lives in Ottawa. “In the end, she didn't have it, but that was a really scary time. I don't want to go what she went through, so I'd like to protect myself as much as possible.”

For other teens, the choice is less obvious. They may want to think it over, and talk about it with a parent or health practitioner.

If the idea of talking to your parents seems embarrassing, says Katherine, “you could say something like, ‘I heard about this shot, and I think I'd like to be protected for the future — just like I've been vaccinated for meningitis or polio.’ You don't need to say anything more than that.”

When you're deciding whether to get the HPV vaccine, it's important to keep a few things in mind:

- The HPV vaccine is given in three doses over six months by a doctor or nurse. You need all three doses, or shots, to be fully protected.
- The vaccine protects against four types of HPV for at least five years. After that, you might need a booster shot.
- The vaccine is safe and effective. You might get mild pain or swelling where you have the needle.

- Right now, you have to pay for the vaccine — it costs about \$400 to \$500 for all three doses. The cost may make it harder for you or your family to get the vaccine, but it is covered by some private health plans.
- The vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV — just the four types that cause most of the cases of genital warts and cervical cancer. The vaccine will only protect against HPV types that you have not been exposed to; but even if you have been previously diagnosed with HPV it is highly unlikely that you have been exposed to all four types included in the vaccine.
- Even if you've had the vaccine, you'll still need to have regular Pap tests once you start having sex. Regular Pap tests are one of the best ways to prevent cervical cancer. Talk to your doctor or nurse about when to start having Pap tests.

So, should you get the HPV vaccine? That's a choice that only you can make. But you don't have to make it alone. Talk to your parents, your doctor, or nurse practitioner about whether this vaccine is right for you.

Ontario Cervical Screening Program,
Cancer Care Ontario

For more information on HPV vaccines, cervical cancer, and Pap tests, go to:
http://www.cancercare.on.ca/index_cervicalScreening.htm