

PREVENTION

Should You Get the HPV Vaccine?

Adults may be surprised to learn that the vaccine helps protect them from several types of cancer.

By Erin Brereton



While most people know a human papillomavirus virus (HPV) vaccine exists, according to Dr. Natalie Godbee, a Gynecologic Oncologist at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA), Phoenix, many believe that it's just for teens and young adults in their twenties.

Many adults, particularly those being treated with cancer aren't aware, however, getting the HPV vaccine might be a good idea.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States. Nearly all sexually active men and women will come into contact with it at some point in their lives, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

Unfortunately, several of the more than 100 strains of HPV can put you at risk of developing certain cancers, including cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva and throat.

Each year, approximately 41,000 people U.S. are diagnosed with cancer that was caused by an [HPV infection](#). More than half of the cases are diagnosed in women (57.8%). Almost all cases of cervical cancer are HPV related. Cancers of the head and neck are often caused by tobacco and alcohol, but recent studies show that about 70% of cancers of the oropharynx, part of the throat, may be linked to HPV. Many cancers of the oropharynx may be caused by a combination of tobacco, alcohol, and HPV.

Misconceptions Can Produce Confusion

The first HPV vaccine, which protects against four strains of the disease, was introduced in the U.S. in 2006. A vaccine released in 2014 protects against a total of nine.

The CDC currently recommends males and females be inoculated between 9 and 26 years old. Although men and women who are 27 and older may assume that means they aren't candidates for the vaccine, that isn't necessarily true.

Insurance may not cover the cost; but the vaccine can still have an effect. The age range, according to Dr. Godbee, was set to try to ensure the vaccine would be given before any HPV exposure had occurred.

More than half of teenagers say they've had sexual intercourse by age 18. By age 20, 75 percent have, according to a 2017 [CDC report](#).

"You're more likely to contract HPV in your teens or early 20s, so that's the population they were focused on during the [drug] trials," she says. "However, you can still get the vaccine after 26."

Some people may think being in a long-term relationship means they aren't at risk of contracting HPV. Their partner, though, may not have had any idea he had HPV when they met as the [body often clears the virus before symptoms appear](#).

"All it takes is one partner," Dr. Godbee says.

Because the condition is so prevalent, she recommends patients who have been diagnosed with cancer or dysplasia, a type of abnormal cell development that can develop into cancer, consider getting the vaccine.

Patients with cervical cancer are the only exception, because Dr. Godbee says more studies need to be done to gauge the vaccine's effectiveness in individuals who have already developed that type of cancer.

"Even if you have an abnormal pap smear, we still recommend having it," she says. "You may be diagnosed with one strain of the HPV virus, but the vaccine can protect against the others."

Hope for the Future

Adults typically receive the HPV vaccine as a series of two or three injections, spread out over six months to 24 months. According to Dr. Godbee, the side effects are roughly what patients could expect from any other type of shot—possible redness and discomfort felt at the injection site.

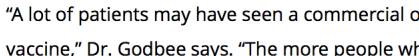
The [CDC](#) does not recommend pregnant women, people with a moderate or severe illness, or people who have a life-threatening allergic reaction to the first injection or any components of the vaccine receive it.

HPV doesn't always present obvious symptoms until it develops into cancer. As a result, women who receive the vaccine will still need to schedule routine pap smear-based screening exams to test for the disease.

[Studies](#) have shown, however, that since the vaccine's introduction, there has been a significant reduction in HPV infections.

"A lot of patients may have seen a commercial or heard of it; they just don't necessarily know to ask about the vaccine," Dr. Godbee says. "The more people who get vaccinated, the more we'll see a decrease in the prevalence of cervical and head and neck cancers."

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