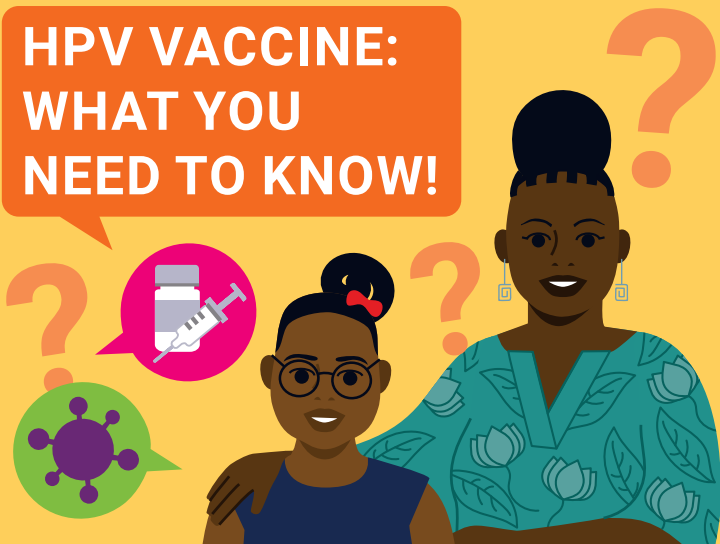


# Common questions about...

## HPV VACCINE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW!



The HPV vaccine is an injection that protects you from something called the 'human papillomavirus' (HPV). Most of the time HPV won't do you any harm but some types of the virus can cause warts on your genitals (private parts) and sometimes it can lead to cancer. The vaccination is given to 9–14-year-olds to stop the spread of HPV and to lower the chances of getting cancer when you grow up.

Lots of countries all over the world are using the vaccine to stop the spread of the HPV virus. In some countries they give the vaccine to certain groups that can be more at risk like teenage girls and young women, young people living with HIV and young mothers. There are also countries that are offering the vaccine to boys as well.



All the questions in this Q&A are based on frequent examples received from young people through UNICEF digital platforms, social listening reports and loGT analytics. The answers were developed in collaboration with a reference group of young people from the ESAR region and reviewed by technical staff from UNICEF, UNFPA and UNAIDS.

1

## What is HPV?



HPV means '**human papilloma virus.**' It spreads when people touch skin or have sex, and a lot of people have it.

H

Human

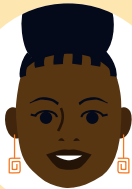
P

Papilloma

V

Virus

Most people who have sex will get HPV at some point if they haven't had the vaccine, but many won't even know they have it. There are more than 100 types of this virus.



Most of them go away on their own but some can cause warts on your genitals (private parts) and also different kinds of cancer.

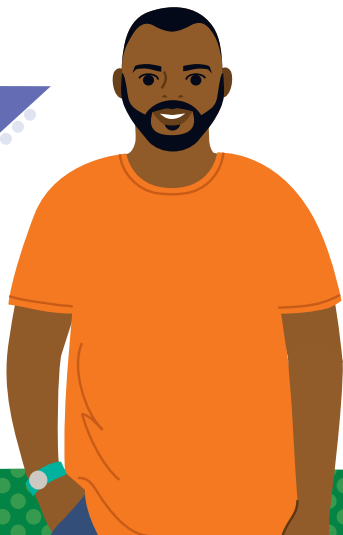
## 2

### Why is HPV so serious?



Some types of HPV are not so serious, but others can be dangerous. Almost all cases of a type of cancer called 'cervical cancer', which affects a part of a female body called the womb, are caused by HPV. Every two minutes, somewhere in the world, a woman dies from this cancer. Places like Southern and Eastern Africa have some of the highest rates of this cancer in the world.

HPV can also lead to other cancers, like ones in the vulva, vagina, penis, bottom, or throat. People with weaker immune systems, like those living with HIV, are at a higher risk of getting HPV.

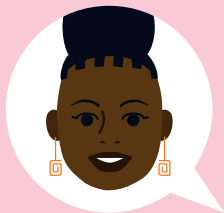


3

**How would I know if I had already had HPV?**



A lot of people with HPV don't feel any different, and have no symptoms, so they might not even know they have it. That's why getting checked is super important. Cervical screening, sometimes called a 'pap smear' or 'smear test,' checks if everything is okay around a part of a girl or woman's body called the cervix.



Doctors say it's good for all women to have their first check by the time they're 30, and then keep going every 5 to 10 years to make sure everything stays healthy.



Because girls with HIV have a higher chance of getting HPV, they should start getting checked at 25, and go more often, every 3 to 5 years. Some places check all women over 25. Even if you've had the HPV vaccine, it's still important to get checked.

For girls, if you notice any strange bleeding that's not during your period, you need to tell a doctor.

And boys, it's good to check yourself often and tell someone if you see any lumps, bleeding, or changes to your skin around your private parts or bottom.



4

## Why do I need to be vaccinated against HPV?



Getting vaccinated against HPV is really important as it lowers your chances of getting certain cancers. Since we can't tell who might get cancer, it's a good idea that everyone has the HPV vaccination.



It's best to get it between 9-14 years – before you start having sex so it can protect you as early as possible. But even if you have already started having sex it is still important to get the vaccine.



Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer affecting women in East and Southern Africa, but the good news is that this vaccine can stop it from happening. It's a safe way to look after your health.

5

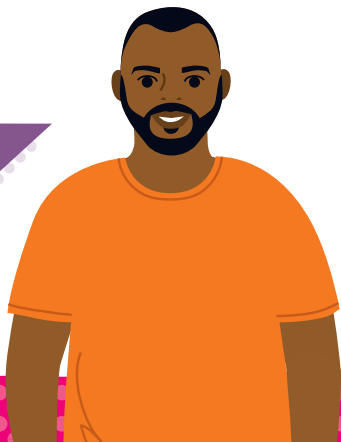
**What is the HPV vaccine and what will it protect me from?**



You might have had injections when you were little to keep you safe from different illnesses and the HPV vaccine is like that.

The HPV vaccine protects you from 9 types of HPV that cause most cervical cancer cases, as well as other cancers. It also stops you getting the two types of HPV that cause warts on your genitals.

Depending on where you live you might get one injection or two. Either way it helps to keep you healthy!





6

**What will the vaccine not protect against?**



The HPV vaccine is great at protecting you from certain types of HPV that can cause cancers and warts. But it won't keep you safe from other infections you can get through sex, and it won't stop you from getting pregnant.



That's why it's really important to use condoms

every time you have sex, and to visit the doctor regularly to check for infections if you're having sex.



7

## Who should be vaccinated against HPV?



Everyone who is offered the HPV vaccination should have it! But different places do it differently. The World Health Organization thinks it's best for girls between 9-14 years to get the vaccine first. That way they're protected before they start having sex.



It's best to have the vaccine before you start having sex but if you're already sexually active, it's still important to get vaccinated.



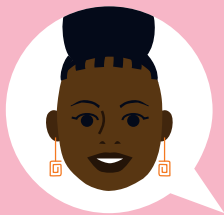
People with weaker immune systems and those living with HIV should also get the vaccine. In some countries they also offer it to boys and older women.

8

**I'm living with HIV,  
can I have the HPV  
vaccine and is it  
safe for me?**



Absolutely! Not only is the HPV vaccination safe for people living with HIV, but it is also really important. Girls and women who have a weaker immune system, like those living with HIV, are more likely to get HPV infections which can lead to cervical cancer.



Girls and women living with HIV should get at least two – and ideally three- doses of the vaccination to give the best protection against HPV.

It's also important to go for regular cervical screening every 3-5 years starting around 25 years old to make sure everything is ok with cells in the cervix and get treated if needed.

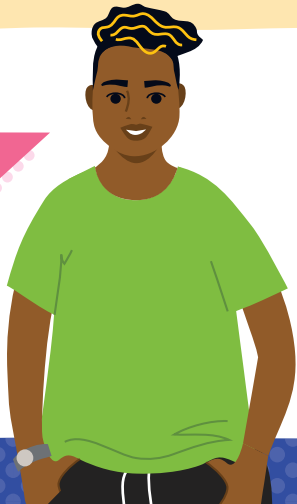
9

**Why do I need to get vaccinated against HPV now, can't I wait until I'm older?**



Research says that getting the HPV vaccine between 9 and 14 years old is best because it helps your body get ready to fight off HPV before you start having sex.

This way, your body can build up protection against the virus before you even come into contact with it.



10

**Can boys get vaccinated against HPV too?**



Boys can get the HPV vaccine too, which helps stop them from getting certain cancers in their private parts, bottom, and throat, and also prevents genital warts.



When boys get the vaccine, they can't spread HPV either. Some countries give the vaccine to boys, but the priority is to vaccinate girls and young women to prevent cervical cancer.

If you are offered the HPV vaccine, it's super important to get it!

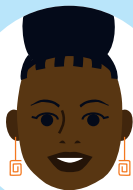


11

**Will the HPV vaccine hurt?**



The vaccination is given as an injection in the muscle at the top of your arm. It may sting a little and your arm may ache a bit afterwards but don't worry, it's very quick!



It's normal to feel nervous before getting an injection, but it's worth it for the protection against different cancers.

The nurses give the injection to thousands of young people every year and will help you to relax and put you at ease.



12

**Are there any side effects of the HPV vaccine?**



Most people have no problems with the HPV vaccine, but your arm may feel a bit sore after the injection and there may be a bit of swelling, but it will soon go.

Some other rare side effects include headache, feeling sick and dizzy and hot. Very rarely, some people have a reaction soon after the injection, like a rash, but severe allergic reactions are not common and people recover completely with treatment, usually after only a couple of hours. The nurse will know what to do if you don't feel well after the injection and don't let that stop you from getting vaccinated.



Lots of people all around the world have had this vaccine since 2006, over 80 million in 121 countries! And experts are always checking to make sure it's safe. There's no evidence that it causes any long-term problems.

13

Where do I go to get the HPV vaccine?



Depending on where you live, you might get the HPV vaccine at school or at the clinic. A nurse from the school or from outside might give it to you.



If you have any questions or feel worried, you can ask the nurse, and they'll help you feel better.

Your parent or someone who takes care of you will need to fill out a form giving permission for you to get the vaccine.





14

**My parents don't want me to get the HPV vaccine, how can I persuade them?**



If you're younger than 16, your parents might need to say it's OK for you to get the HPV vaccine. Different countries have different rules about this. If your parents are worried about the vaccine, talk to them about it.

Sometimes people get scared of vaccines because they've heard wrong information, like with the COVID-19 vaccine. Your school or clinic can give your parents more information about the HPV vaccine to help them feel better.



Some parents might be worried because they think that having a vaccine to prevent you getting a virus that is transmitted through sex will encourage you to start having sex earlier.

You can tell them you want the vaccine to stay healthy and to stop certain cancers and to protect you later when you do become sexually active.

If your parents still aren't sure, maybe ask another adult they trust, like a teacher or a family friend, to talk to them about it.



15

**I don't want to have the HPV vaccine, do I really have to have it?**



You get to decide if you want to have the HPV vaccine. Nobody can make you get it if you don't want to but it's a smart choice because it keeps you safe from HPV and lowers your chances of getting certain cancers later on in life.

It's OK to feel nervous about getting an injection but it's quick and helps you stay healthy for a long time.



## Further information and contact details

(Type in the box below to add text)



Published April 2024 © UNICEF



together  
4SRHR

unicef   
for every child

