Arm against cervical cancer

All that 17- and 18-year-old girls need to know about the vaccine that helps protect against cervical cancer

Beating cervical cancer
The essential guide to the HPV vaccination for girls aged 17 and 18

This leaflet is about the new vaccination to help protect you against cervical cancer. If you want more information, check out www.nhs.uk/hpv

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer affects the cervix (the entrance to the womb – see diagram below). It is caused by a virus called the human papillomavirus or HPV.

Cervical cancer can be very serious and around 1000 women die from it in the UK each year.
HPV and how it spreads

There are over 100 types of human papillomavirus but only 13 of them are known to cause cancer. The others cause conditions like genital warts or are harmless. The virus is very common and you catch it by having sexual contact with another person who already has it. Because it is so common, as much as half the population will get infected at some point in their lives. Most of the time, however, the virus does not cause cancer because it is killed off by the body’s immune system. But not always – this is why the vaccine is so important.

The HPV vaccine

The vaccine that you’re being offered protects against the two types of the virus – types 16 and 18 – that cause most cases (over 70%) of cervical cancer.

It does not protect you against all cervical cancers, so it’s essential that you have cervical screening (tests) when you are older (25 and over in England).

By having the vaccination you will reduce your risk of getting cervical cancer when you are older.
Having the vaccination

You will need three injections over about six months to get the best protection. It is important that you have all three doses. The nurse will give you the vaccination in your upper arm.

Your school or local NHS will contact you when it is time for your vaccination.

Side effects

The side effects of the vaccination are quite mild – usually just stinging and soreness in the arm that soon wears off. The vaccine meets the rigorous safety standards required for it to be used in the UK and other European countries.

Very rarely, some people have a reaction soon after the injection. This reaction may be a rash or itching that affects some or all of the body. The nurse will know how to treat this. It is not a reason not to have more injections against HPV or other diseases.

Even more rarely, some people can have a severe reaction soon after the immunisation which makes it difficult for them to breathe and may make them collapse. This is called an anaphylactic reaction. These are extremely rare and nurses are trained to deal with them. People recover completely with treatment, usually within a few hours.
Giving consent

You can choose whether to have the vaccine (give consent) yourself but you may want to talk about it with your parents. The doctor or nurse will discuss the HPV vaccine with you at your appointment and will be able to answer any further questions you may have.

Sexual health and well-being

If you have been sexually active, there is a possibility that you may already have been infected with HPV. However, it is strongly recommended that you still have the vaccine to protect yourself against the two most serious types of HPV virus that can lead to cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine won’t protect you against other sexually transmitted infections and it won’t stop you getting pregnant. If you would like more information, talk to your doctor or nurse. You should not have the vaccine if you are pregnant. If you think you might be pregnant, speak to your doctor or nurse.
Remember, cervical screening will continue to be essential whether you have had the HPV vaccination or not.

Missed your appointment?

Speak to your nurse to arrange another one. It is important that you have all three doses.

More information

You can get more information at www.nhs.uk/hpv. You can also phone the HPV helpline on 0845 602 3303.

Calls cost at least 5 pence a minute from a BT landline. Calls from mobiles and other networks may cost more. You may be charged a minimum cost for each call.