

Some common questions and answers:

What is Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer is cancer of the cervix. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus, or womb, and is situated at the top of the vagina. Cervical cancer develops when abnormal cells in the lining of the cervix begin to multiply out of control and form pre-cancerous abnormalities. If undetected, these abnormalities can develop into tumours and spread into the surrounding tissue.

What causes cervical cancer and abnormal cervical cells?

Cervical cancer is caused by infection with certain types of a common virus called human papillomavirus (HPV). There are approximately 40 types of HPV that affect the genital areas. Anyone who has had any kind of sexual activity involving genital contact could get genital HPV. In most women the virus is harmless and has no symptoms, but in some women infected with certain types of HPV, the virus may persist and lead to cervical cancer. Abnormal cervical cells including pre-cancerous abnormalities are also caused by certain types of HPV infection and are usually detected during a Pap smear.

Does HPV cause any other diseases?

Yes, this group of viruses also cause genital warts and some other cancers such as cancer of the vulva and vagina. Do not confuse HPV with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) or the HSV (herpes simplex virus), as they are not related and are different infections.

How can a vaccine prevent cancer?

The vaccine currently supplied free by the Government works by causing the body to produce its own protection against certain HPV types. The vaccine protects against the HPV types which cause the majority of cervical cancers and pre-cancers, some low-grade cervical abnormalities and some other HPV related diseases.

If I get vaccinated will I still need pap smears?

Yes. The vaccine is designed to protect against cervical cancer due to the HPV types in the vaccine. The HPV types covered by the vaccine cause up to 80% of all cervical cancers. Therefore you must still continue to have regular Pap tests to detect any abnormal cell changes due to the HPV types not covered by the vaccine. Vaccination plus 2 yearly regular Pap smears offers you the best prevention strategy against both cervical cancers and pre-cancerous abnormalities.

Will the vaccine still benefit me if I am already sexually active or have already had an abnormal pap smear?

Yes, as it is unlikely that a woman will have been infected with all the HPV types covered by the vaccine. Women who have had an abnormal Pap smear result may still benefit from the vaccine, as the HPV type that caused the abnormality may not have been one included in the vaccine.

How many doses are required?

The vaccine is given as 3 doses over 6 months, given via injection into the muscle in the upper arm or thigh.

How safe is the vaccine?

The vaccine was shown to be well tolerated during large clinical trials. The most common side effects are redness, swelling or pain at the injection site, and mild fever.

Further information

Your GP can answer any other questions you may have and further information is available at: www.cervicalcancer.com.au or www.health.gov.au/cervicalcancer