
NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Health

NEW VACCINE PROGRAM TO PROTECT GIRLS AGAINST CANCER

VICTORIA – Beginning this fall, girls in British Columbia entering grades 6 and 9 will be eligible for a free vaccine that will prevent 70 per cent of cervical cancers, Health Minister George Abbott announced today.

“The recently approved HPV vaccine provides us with an opportunity to vaccinate against the vast majority of cervical cancers in women, and we believe our long-term cancer prevention strategy will prevent women from developing cancer in years to come,” said Abbott. “We want parents and students to know that this vaccine protects girls and women from cancer, and we’ll be sending home more information about the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and the HPV vaccine before the end of the school year so they can make informed decisions when the vaccination program begins this fall.”

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in Canada and cervical cancer is the second most common type of cancer for women between the ages of 20 and 40. According to the BC Cancer Agency, approximately 143 women in B.C. will be diagnosed with cervical cancer this year and 55 will die from the disease.

“This is an important step forward and complements our current efforts in the fight against cervical cancer,” said Dr. Andy Coldman, BC Cancer Agency vice-president of population oncology. “The agency’s Cervical Cancer Screening program, created in 1949, has already helped reduce cervical cancer rates in B.C. by 70 per cent and the HPV vaccine immunization program will help reduce that rate even further.”

The provincial immunization program is being launched on the advice of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, the provincial health officer and the health authorities, as well as agencies of the Provincial Health Services Authority, including the BC Centre for Disease Control, BC Cancer Agency, BC Women’s Hospital and BC Children’s Hospital. For the first three years of the program, female students in grades 6 and 9 will be eligible to receive the vaccine, which requires three doses given over six months. After this three-year, catch-up program, the vaccine will be provided during Grade 6 only.

“This is a vaccine that is safe and very effective against the two most common cancer-causing strains of HPV,” noted Dr. Monika Naus, head of the immunization program at the BC Centre for Disease Control. “We still want women to have regular Pap tests, because the current vaccine does not prevent all cancer-causing HPV strains, and early detection of pre-cancerous changes is key.”

The HPV vaccine is currently being used in 93 countries around the world, including the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and most European and Scandinavian countries. Information about the new HPV program and answers to common questions about immunization are available at www.immunizebc.ca.

Information about the Human Papillomavirus is available through the BC HealthGuide at www.bchealthguide.org, by calling the BC Nurseline at (604) 215-4700 in the greater Vancouver area, toll-free at 1 (866) 215-4700, or by speaking with a family physician.

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1 backgrounder(s) attached.

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BACKGROUND

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HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS AND THE HPV VACCINE

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common, yet preventable, infection that can lead to cancer of the cervix, and is associated with other types of cancer in both women and men.

There are more than 100 types of HPV, including a number of strains linked to cervical cancer. Most HPV infections will clear on their own but for some women the HPV will not go away and cells infected with the virus can develop into cancer.

In the fall of 2008, British Columbia will begin offering the vaccine Gardasil, which is almost 100 per cent effective in preventing cancerous changes in the cervix due to two strains (types 16 and 18) of HPV. These two types of HPV are responsible for 70 per cent of all cases of cervical cancer in B.C.

Clinical trials involving approximately 20,000 girls and women aged 16 to 26 have shown that Gardasil is safe, and rarely causes allergic reactions. There is no evidence that it causes auto-immune diseases. Surveillance and research underway will determine its effectiveness over the long term, including any need for booster shots to maintain protection.

Gardasil has been approved by Health Canada which regulates and approves vaccines for use, and recommended by the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, which reviews evidence of safety and effectiveness. The Committee has recommended immunizations for girls ages 9-13, before the likelihood of sexual activity and HPV infection.

A second product, Cervarix, has been widely used in Europe, and is currently being reviewed for use in Canada. Both products have been extensively tested, and are highly effective against HPV types 16 and 18.

Frequently Asked Questions

How common is HPV?

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in Canada. It can result from any oral or genital contact – intercourse is not necessary – and at least 50 per cent of sexually active women will get HPV at some time in their lives. In B.C., over 30 per cent of girls are sexually active by the time they are 16. In studies on young women who became sexually active, almost 50 per cent became infected with at least one type of HPV within three years of initiation of sexual activity. Other studies have shown that over 90 per cent of those cervical HPV infections will clear on their own. Only a small percentage will lead to changes in the cells of the cervix.

Will my daughter be required to get the vaccine?

Immunization is not mandatory in B.C. However, eligible candidates are strongly encouraged to take advantage of this new vaccine. Vaccines save lives. They also prevent many harmful effects caused by disease.

Why give the HPV vaccine to girls at such a young age?

It's always better to prevent disease than treat it. The vaccine is most effective when girls/women are immunized before their first sexual contact. However, even after sexual activity has begun, women may still benefit from the vaccine if they have not been infected with the strains contained in the vaccine.

Will girls/women be protected against HPV and related diseases, even if they don't get all three doses?

Studies are underway to determine whether fewer doses of the vaccine offer the same level of protection. Until we know the results, it is important to get all three doses of the vaccine.

Can HPV infection be treated?

There is no cure for HPV, but there are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause, such as genital warts, cervical cell changes, and cancers caused by HPV.

Are there additional ways girls and women can reduce their risk of HPV infection and cervical cancer?

The risk of HPV infection increases with the number of sexual partners and unprotected sex. Therefore, abstinence, reducing the number of sexual partners and using condoms during sex can all reduce the risk of HPV infection. Girls and women can also lower their risk of cervical cancer by not smoking. Most important, however, are regular Pap tests – as recommended by physicians – to detect any cervical changes before cancer develops.

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