

HPV VACCINE

The Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is the most common kind of sexually transmitted virus. There are many types of this virus. Among the types that infect the genital tract, some of the HPV can cause genital warts. Certain “high-risk” types can infect the cervix and cause cellular changes that increase the risk for cancer of the cervix. Pap tests and tests for “High-Risk HPV DNA” help to identify pre-cancerous changes.

“High-Risk” HPV types are a factor in most cases of cervical cancer, but not every woman who is infected will actually develop cancer. In some women, the immune system is able to clear the infection. When the immune system is compromised (as with smoking, diabetes, and certain medications), there is increased risk for cancer.

The new HPV vaccine (*Gardasil*) immunizes women against the two types of HPV that most commonly cause genital warts and the two types of HPV that cause about 70% of cervical cancer. The vaccine does not provide any protection against the other types of HPV that can lead to cervical cancer. The vaccine also does not protect against a virus that has already infected the cervix.

The vaccine has been tested most extensively in women ages 9 – 26. Women in this age group may not yet have been exposed to the HPV viruses, and their immune systems seem to respond better to the vaccine. However, women outside this age group may also be good candidates for the vaccine.

Vaccination consists of a series of three injections over a six month period. Side effects from the injections are typically minimal. At this time, it is not known how long protection against the HPV will last. It is possible that a “booster shot” will be necessary in the future.