

HPV VACCINE: INFORMATION FOR MUSLIM PARENTS

What is HPV?

- The human papillomavirus, or HPV, is the most common family of viruses. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the world today with the main risk factor being an increased number of lifetime sexual partners (promiscuity).
- Most genital infections with HPV do not cause any symptoms and people usually do not know they have the infection. Most women who have HPV clear the virus naturally and do not develop cervical cancer.
- Some types of the HPV virus are considered "low risk" and can cause genital and anal warts.
- Other types are considered "high risk" and can cause lesions and cancer in the cervix, anus and other genital areas. Cervical cancer is a disease where cancer cells grow and spread quickly throughout the body from the cervix. The cervix is the lowest part of the uterus (womb).

How do people get HPV?

- HPV is spread by direct skin to skin contact with a person who has the virus. For cervical cancer and genital warts, HPV is spread by all types of skin contact involving sexual activity.

How do people know they have HPV?

- There are no tests available to detect the HPV virus.
- When the low risk types of HPV cause genital warts, these can appear several weeks, and sometimes months, after sexual contact.
- When the high-risk types of HPV cause lesions and cancer in woman, the Pap test is an effective way to find early signs of abnormalities and pre-cancerous cells in the cervix.

Can HPV be prevented?

1. **Abstinence** - i.e., avoiding all sexual contact including skin-to-skin sexual activity is the only way to avoid contracting HPV.
2. **Lifelong monogamy** – having one faithful long-term and uninfected sexual partner, is another effective way to avoid contracting HPV.
3. **Using condoms** is an effective prevention strategy for sexually transmitted infections. Condoms however may not eliminate completely the risk of transmitting HPV because the virus can be contracted through skin-to-skin contact beyond the covered area.
4. **Regular Pap testing** is the only way to detect abnormal cells in a women's cervix that could lead to cervical cancer later in life.
5. **Vaccines** have been developed to prevent a person from contracting HPV and could help reduce the incidence of HPV-related complications. The HPV vaccine provides protection against four types of HPV, which cause 70% of cervical cancers.

Can HPV be cured?

- Most people with HPV have no signs or symptoms and normally HPV will clear up by itself.
- There is currently no medical cure to eliminate HPV.
- If someone contracts the low risk types of HPV that cause genital warts, the warts can be removed with treatment at home or at the doctor's surgery.
- If someone contracts high risk types of HPV that cause cervical, anal or other genital cancer, the treatment will depend on the stage of development at the time of diagnosis.

Is the HPV Vaccine Safe?

- The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval was conditional on manufacturer assurances concerning ongoing safety and efficacy studies. Clinical trials thus far have involved a relatively small population (< 12,000 participants) for a limited period of follow-up (5 years). The most common side effect reported to date is injection site reactions (pain, swelling, itching, etc).
- The vaccine contains aluminium but no thimerosal, mercury or infectious material.

Muslim Parents:

- Consider the information above carefully when deciding whether to have your daughter(s) vaccinated.
- Abstinence before marriage and faithful relations after marriage (i.e., lifelong monogamy) as prescribed by Islam are effective ways of preventing HPV infection and the subsequent risk of cervical cancer.

References: (1) <http://www.hpvinfos.ca/hpvinfos/teachers/>; (2) JAMA 2007, 297 (17):1921-3; (3) BMJ 2007; 334: 721-3; (4)http://access.health.qld.gov.au/hid/InfectionsandParasites/ImmunisationandVaccination/cervicalCancerAndHumanPapillomavirusHp_v_ap.asp (5) <http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/STDFact-HPV-vaccine.htm#hpvvac3>

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