

HPV vaccination for cervical cancer

Written by Ma. Rachel R. Yapchiongco
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In these modern times, parents confront the reality that the youth face sexual maturity at an early age. Perhaps the changing times, modern ideology, peer pressure and other environmental factors contribute to early sexual awareness among the youth.

This fact pushes [pediatricians and obstetricians to encourage parents](#) to have their adolescent daughters vaccinated against cervical cancer.

[Second to breast cancer](#) , [cervical cancer](#) is one of the leading causes of mortality among Filipino women. Cervical cancer is caused by a common yet infectious virus is known as the [human papillomavirus or HPV](#)

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HPV 101

There are over one hundred types of identified HPV, most of which are relatively harmless. Most people who become infected with HPV may not even be aware that they have it because they do not develop symptoms. In [90% of cases](#), the body's immune system naturally gets rid of HPV in a span of two years.

HPV is not exclusively a health issue of women alone. In fact, HPV [affects both men and women](#). HPV does not just cause cervical cancer. It also brings health concerns like genital warts and other HPV-related cancers.

Out of one hundred, [forty HPV types affect the genital area](#). They are called papillomaviruses because some result to [warts](#) ([locally termed kulugo](#)), or [papillomas](#), which are usually benign tumors.

Low risk types of HPV (HPV 6 and HPV 11) can cause genital warts and abnormal cervical changes which may lead to abnormal Pap test results. Approximately [90% of genital warts cases](#) are associated with HPV 6 and HPV 11.

Genital warts are characterized as '[a small bump or groups of bumps in the genital area](#)'. These warts may be small or large, flat or elevated, or resemble the shape of a cauliflower. A gynecologist or health care provider can diagnose presence of genital warts. Genital warts may go away on their own, remain as is, increase in size or multiply in number if left untreated. They will [not turn into cancer](#).

High-risk types of HPV (HPV 16 and HPV 18), on the other hand, can cause [cervical, vulvar, vaginal, penile, anal cancers and abnormal cervical changes](#)

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that can lead to cancer. Approximately [70% of cervical cancer cases](#) are linked to HPV 16 and HPV 18.

HPV infection is spread mainly through [genital contact](#) (vaginal or anal sex). Infection is also possible through hand-genital transmission and oral-genital transmission. In very rare occasion, a pregnant woman with genital HPV can pass the infection to her baby during the process of birth. In such instances, the baby can develop [recurrent respiratory papillomatosis](#) or RRP.

The HPV vaccine: should you and your daughters (and sons) get it?

Who are at risk?

People who are at [risk for HPV infection](#) are individuals who:

- **have many sex partners**

- **are younger than 25 years of age**

- **have experienced early sexual intercourse (age 16 or younger)**

- **have a partner who has multiple sex partners**

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• **have a partner who already has HPV virus**

What are the types of HPV vaccines?

Quadrivalent HPV vaccine:

- **Girls and women ages 9 to 45 years**
- **Boys and male adolescent ages 9 to 26 years**
- **Catch-up vaccination for females aged 13 to 26 years (no previous vaccination)**

The Quadrivalent HPV vaccine is given in **two** doses administered intramuscularly within 6 months

Bivalent HPV vaccine:

- **Girls and women ages 10 onwards**

The Bivalent HPV vaccine is given in **three** doses administered intramuscularly within 6 months

- *The benefits*

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the [quadrivalent HPV vaccine in 2006](#). The HPV vaccine can significantly reduce the threat of developing cervical cancer and other genital cancers and diseases. HPV vaccine [offers protection against four of the HPV strains](#)—two (HPV 16 and 18) of which are linked to 70% of the cervical cancer cases and the other two (HPV 6 and 11) that have been connected to 90% of the genital warts cases.

The same vaccine that prevents cervical cancer, vulvar and vaginal cancers as well as genital warts was [approved by Philippine Bureau of Food and Drugs \(BFAD\)](#) and is already available in the country. A bivalent HPV vaccine that protects against HPV 16 and 18 that cause cervical cancer has also been approved by the BFAD for use in the Philippines.

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To ensure effectiveness of the HPV vaccine, it should be given before [an individual has any type of sexual contract](#) with another person. However, women who are already sexually active may still benefit from the vaccine. Even if a woman is exposed to HPV, it is unlikely that she has been exposed to all HPV types covered by the vaccine. Thus, the vaccine can still protect the individual from other HPV types that she has not yet been exposed to.

[During a forum](#) , Dr. May Montellano, president of the [Pediatric Infectious Disease Society of the Philippines](#) , said, “[...] the best time to receive HPV vaccination is before puberty prior to sexual debut. Studies show that the younger the age at vaccination, the higher antibody concentrations are achieved and therefore the better the protection against HPV infection.”

According to the [women’s cancer specialist and one of the principal investigators](#) in research of HPV vaccine, “Investing in a vaccine proven to protect against cervical cancer and other genital cancers is smart. The cost of the vaccine is a fraction of the cost of cancer treatment.”

- ***The doubts***

Despite the apparent advantages, controversies and questions on safety surround the HPV vaccine.

Dr. May Montellano stresses that HPV vaccine *can* [only prevent and not treat infection](#) .

The HPV vaccine [does not prevent all HPV strains](#) , thus it does not prevent all cases of cervical cancer. The vaccine [cannot treat existing cervical cancer](#) and other HPV caused diseases.

Some [parents are hesitant](#) about HPV vaccination because it might mislead their daughters to think that it’s safe to have sex, which could lead to sexual promiscuity. Some parents are angered at the idea of subjecting pre-teens to the vaccination. There are also those who think that their children are not at risk for developing HPV.

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Since it's relatively new in the market, long-term effects of the vaccine cannot be determined. Cases of [adverse effects](#) in the U.S. following HPV vaccination have been reported, causing further alarm. Startling descriptions such as ['anaphylactic shock,'](#) ['foaming at mouth,'](#) ['grand mal convulsion,'](#) ['coma'](#) and ['now paralyzed'](#) appeared on a federal report. A Washington group called Judicial Watch is calling for the product's [re-evaluation and prohibition of distribution among minors](#)

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Similar reports claim that some girls and women in the U.S. have complained of health problems ranging from [nausea to paralysis and even death](#). There have been fifteen reported deaths to FDA, ten of which were confirmed. However, CDC stresses that [none of the ten deaths were linked to the vaccine](#)

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The price of HPV vaccine does not come cheap either, ranging from [P5,000 to P7,000 a shot](#) in 2008. Three shots are required to get complete protection from HPV with the vaccine. For the average Filipino, that is quite a sum of money.

Cervical cancer advocates

In May 2009, Senator Pia Cayetano [organized a forum on Cervical Cancer Prevention](#) in the Senate together with the help of CECAP to raise awareness about prevention of cervical cancer. Cayetano also spearheaded the anti-HPV vaccination to a handful of women from whom she believed symbolically represented Filipina women from different sectors of society.

Cayetano exemplifies her commitment to women's health and prevention of cervical cancer by dedicating public funds to purchase equipment, among other projects.

Dr. Ricardo Manalastas Jr., chief of the UP-PGH Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Section of Infectious Diseases, and his IDS group [launched an HPV vaccine advocacy program in December 2008](#)

. The program focuses on socio-civic organizations, private schools, and corporations, explaining the benefits and cost of the HPV vaccine to these groups. Dr. Manalastas hopes to make the HPV vaccine more affordable by negotiating with the PGH management to give

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discounts to patients.

Personal choice

The choice to get vaccinated against HPV is a personal one. Every person has the right to decide whether or not to shield oneself from the risk of HPV and the greater danger of cervical cancer. It is up to each person to weigh the pros and cons of HPV vaccination and determine which of the two weighs heavier.

If you decide that you want to avail of the vaccination, make sure you get your doctor's go signal before proceeding. Take note that a [doctor determines the appropriateness of HPV vaccination](#) for each patient. HPV vaccines are contraindicated to those who are hypersensitive to the active ingredients of the vaccine. Always disclose severe allergies to your doctor. Women who are pregnant should not be vaccinated.

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Rachel Yapchiongco, also known as Rach to her friends, is a Psychology and Marketing Management graduate of De La Salle University. She took up several units of MBA at the same university. Rachel is a full-time mom to a charming young boy and married to an entrepreneur with a passion for cooking. She shares parenting experiences and slices of everyday life on her personal blog called [Heart of Rachel](#).