HPV and the HPV vaccine

The HPV vaccine protects against the types of HPV that cause most cervical cancers, as well as other HPV-related cancers and genital warts. In Australia, it is free for young people up to and including age 25.

KEY POINTS

- Australia uses Gardasil 9, which protects against nine types of HPV.
- One dose is given free at school, at around 12 to 13 years of age.
- If you missed it, a free catch-up dose is available up to and including age 25.
- One dose is enough for most people aged 9 to 25. People who are immunocompromised need three.
- Vaccinated people still need cervical screening from age 25.

About HPV

HPV is a very common virus, passed on through intimate skin-to-skin contact. Most people will have it at some time, and the body usually clears it without any symptoms. Some types can persist and cause cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus, penis and throat. Other types cause genital warts.

What the vaccine covers

Gardasil 9 protects against HPV types 6, 11, 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52 and 58. Seven of these can cause cancer, including types 16 and 18; types 6 and 11 cause most genital warts. The vaccine works best when given before any contact with HPV, which is why it is offered in early high school.

AGE 12 TO 13	UP TO AGE 25	AGE 26 AND OVER	IMMUNOCOMPROMISED
School program	**Free catch-up**	**Not free**	**Three doses**
One free dose, usually in Year 7.	One dose through your GP, a pharmacy or a clinic.	Three doses. Ask whether it would benefit you.	Free up to and including age 25.

Figure 1. Who can have the HPV vaccine in Australia. Free vaccines are through the National Immunisation Program; a consultation fee may apply.

Vaccination and screening work together

The vaccine does not protect against every type of HPV that can cause cancer. This is why everyone with a cervix aged 25 to 74 still needs cervical screening, whether or not they have been vaccinated. Together, vaccination and screening put Australia on track to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem by 2035.

Is it safe?

The HPV vaccine has been used in Australia since 2007 and has an excellent safety record. Common side effects are mild and pass within a day or two: a sore, red or swollen arm, a headache or a mild fever. As with any injection, some young people feel faint, so they are asked to sit for 15 minutes afterwards. The vaccine is not recommended during pregnancy.

Common questions

I already have HPV or abnormal cells. Is it too late?
The vaccine does not treat an existing infection or cell changes. It can still protect against types you have not had. Ask me whether it is worthwhile for you.

Should boys have it too?
Yes. It is offered free to all young people. It protects them against HPV-related cancers and warts, and reduces the spread of HPV.

Can I have it while breastfeeding?
Yes. It can be given while breastfeeding, but not during pregnancy.

I am over 25. Is it worth paying for?
It depends on your circumstances. It may help if you have a new partner or have not had all the vaccine types. Ask me whether it would benefit you.

How long does protection last?
Protection is long-lasting, and no booster is needed.

Is one dose really enough?
Yes, for most people aged 9 to 25. Research shows one dose gives similar protection to two or three.

How do I check whether I have had it?
Your vaccinations are recorded on the Australian Immunisation Register. You can view your record through Medicare or myGov.

I am vaccinated. Can I skip screening?
No. Please have your first screening test at 25, and every 5 years after that if no HPV is found.

I have had treatment for HSIL. Should I have the vaccine?
Some studies suggest vaccination around the time of treatment may lower the chance of changes returning. Ask me whether it is worthwhile for you.

Does the vaccine affect fertility?
No.

Questions to ask your doctor

- Have I had the HPV vaccine, and how many doses?
- Would vaccination benefit me now?
- When is my next screening test due?

When to seek help

After any vaccine, seek medical help straight away if you have trouble breathing, swelling of the face or throat, or feel very unwell. Call 000 in an emergency. For screening concerns, see your GP or contact the rooms.

Rooms	03 8400 6193 — appointments and non-urgent questions, business hours
Urgent, after hours	Dr James Aridas, 0459 706 061 — urgent gynaecology concerns, and pregnancy concerns before 20 weeks
From 20 weeks pregnant	The birth suite at your booked hospital: Epworth Freemasons 03 9483 3833 · Cabrini Malvern 03 9508 6000 · Jessie McPherson 03 9594 2776
Emergency	Call 000 or go to your nearest emergency department

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

1. Australian Immunisation Handbook. Human papillomavirus (HPV). immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au
2. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. HPV vaccine: changes under the National Immunisation Program in 2023 (fact sheet). health.gov.au
3. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. National Strategy for the Elimination of Cervical Cancer in Australia, 2023. health.gov.au
4. Department of Health, Disability and Ageing. Understanding the National Cervical Screening Program management pathway, 2025. health.gov.au/ncsp
5. Jean Hailes for Women's Health. Cervical screening test. jeanhailes.org.au/cervical-screening-test
6. Cancer Council information and support: 13 11 20

This information is general and does not replace individual medical advice. If your circumstances differ from what is described here, please discuss them with Dr Aridas.

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