

Should men be vaccinated against HPV?

by *Chrystal Palaty*

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease. There are many types of HPV; while some are harmless, others are associated with cancer and genital warts. HPV is easily spread—sources estimate that up to three-quarters of sexually active adults will be infected with at least one type of HPV at some point. To complicate matters, there's no easy way to tell if you have it.

Gardasil, manufactured by Merck & Co., is a vaccine that protects against infection by four HPV types: types 6 and 11, which cause 90 percent of genital warts; types 16 and 18, cause 70 percent of cervical cancers. HPV type 16 is also associated with 70 percent of anal cancers. Gardasil is very effective at preventing cervical cancer in women. Gardasil has been approved for females aged 9 – 26 for the last several years in BC and was approved this year by Health Canada for males aged 9 – 26 to prevent genital warts.

The vaccine can only prevent HPV infection and disease if you get vaccinated before you're sexually active. The vaccine doesn't treat HPV, and won't work if you're already infected with HPV.

In men, HPV is associated with anal cancer, some types of penile cancers, and head and neck cancers. The incidence of HPV-related anal and head and neck cancer is increasing, especially in people with HIV.

The question is whether Gardasil will protect PWAs against genital warts and some types of cancer. This isn't simple to answer.

First of all, the vaccine can only prevent HPV infection and disease if you get vaccinated before you're sexually active. The vaccine doesn't treat HPV, and won't work if you're already infected with HPV.

Furthermore, we don't know if Gardasil protects against strains of HPV besides 6, 11, 16, and 18. And we don't know if the vaccine is effective in people who are HIV-positive or immune compromised. Clinical trials are currently underway to test the vaccine in people with HIV.

The bottom line is that the vaccine may prevent HPV infections and may help protect against anal cancer and genital warts, especially in high-risk groups. But it only works if you're not already infected with HPV; since there's no way of knowing if you're infected—and many people are—vaccination at this stage may be pointless. While there's little risk in getting vaccinated, it can be costly. Gardasil is given in three injections at your doctor's office over a six month period, and the cost of each injection is about \$150 – 180. A competing vaccine called Cervarix made by GlaxoSmithKline costs only \$90 per injection, but only protects against infections with HPV types 16 and 18. ⊕

Editor's note: See also article, "The big C," on the previous page.



Chrystal Palaty is a Vancouver-based technical writer who translates science into English.

For more information

The best source of reliable information about Gardasil is your doctor. Other good information sources about HPV and vaccination include:

- ▷ "HPV and cancer in men," www.mayoclinic.com/health/HPV/AN01309
- ▷ "HPV and Anal Cancer," www.thebody.com/content/art1029.html
- ▷ Gardasil product monograph, <http://www.merckfrosst.ca/mfcl/en/corporate/products/gardasil.html>