

Understanding HPV

A guide for parents and caregivers

THE MOST IMPORTANT FACT

The HPV vaccine works best when given early. Doctors recommend starting at ages 9 to 12.

WHAT IS HPV

A very common virus

- HPV stands for human papillomavirus.
- Almost everyone will have HPV at some point in their life.
- Most HPV goes away on its own. Some types can cause cancers of the cervix, throat, mouth, anus, and more.

WHY SO YOUNG

Early means stronger protection

- The vaccine works best before any exposure to HPV.
- HPV spreads through skin-to-skin contact.
- Doctors recommend the vaccine at ages 9 to 12, well before exposure is likely.
- Younger kids also need fewer shots than older teens.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Safety and side effects

- The HPV vaccine has been studied for more than 15 years, with hundreds of millions of doses given worldwide.
- Common side effects: soreness at the shot site, mild fever, feeling tired for a day.
- Serious side effects are very rare.

HOW MANY SHOTS

Two or three, based on age

- Ages 9 to 14: two shots, six to twelve months apart.
- Ages 15 and up: three shots over six months.
- Starting younger means one less shot.

COST AND ACCESS

Often free for kids and teens

- Most health plans cover the HPV vaccine at no cost for kids and teens.
- Medicaid covers it.
- The Vaccines for Children program offers it free for many families.
- Ask your child's clinic or your plan to be sure.

TALKING WITH YOUR CHILD

You do not have to explain it all

- You can say: this is a shot that helps prevent some kinds of cancer.
- Your child's doctor can answer their questions too.
- It is okay if your child has feelings about getting a shot.

SOURCES & EVIDENCE

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HPV Vaccine Recommendations. [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov), 2025.
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