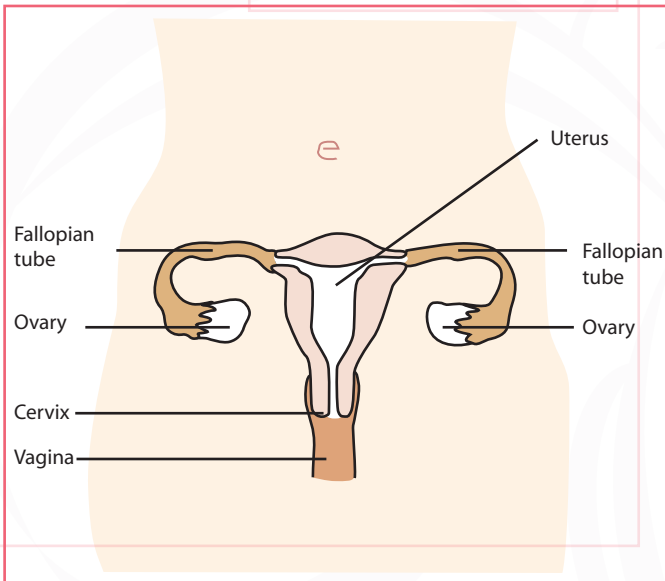


## What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer is a cancer that starts in the cervix, which is the lower part of the womb. It is one of the commonest cancers among Hong Kong women, with around 400 new cases every year.



## What are the symptoms?

The commonest symptoms are abnormal vaginal bleeding or bleeding after intercourse. Many women may not have any symptoms in the early stages of the disease.

## What are the risk factors?

Development of cervical cancer has been linked to infection with 'high risk human papillomavirus (HPV)'. Having multiple sexual partners would increase your chance of getting this infection. Other risk factors include early age of first intercourse and smoking. A weakened immunity would also increase your chance of getting cervical cancer.

## Can cervical cancer be prevented?

You can reduce your chance of getting cervical cancer by

- \* leading a healthy lifestyle such as having a balanced diet and avoiding smoking
- \* practising safer sex such as using condom and having a single sexual partner
- \* having regular cervical smear tests. Before turning into cancers, the cells in the cervix will show some precancerous changes - Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN). Regular cervical smear tests can detect these abnormalities. Early treatment of these changes will prevent the development into cancer.
- \* having vaccination against HPV infection

## What is human papillomavirus (HPV) and how is it related to cervical cancer?

Human papillomavirus is the name of a group of viruses that includes more than 100 types. Around 40 of these viruses infect the genital area of men and women.

It is a very common infection that may affect any woman who has been sexually active. Most people who become infected with HPV will not have any symptoms and will clear the infection on their own.

Some of these viruses are called "high-risk" types and may lead to cancer of the cervix. Others are called "low-risk" types and they may cause genital warts. HPV infection is now regarded as a necessary but not a sole factor for cervical cancer.

## What is the cervical cancer vaccine?

It is a prophylactic vaccine developed to prevent about 70% of cervical cancer by preventing infection by two high risk HPV types (HPV types 16 and 18). What is known so far about the vaccine is based on studies in girls and women aged 9 to 26.

## How effective is the vaccine?

The vaccine is most effective in women who have never been exposed to HPV types 16 and 18 infections. Current data showed that it is 100% effective in preventing precancerous changes (CIN) caused by HPV types 16 and 18. However, HPV 16 and 18 infections account for 70% of cervical cancer and about 60% of precancerous lesions (high grade CIN). Therefore, vaccinated women can still be infected or have CIN caused by other HPV types.

## How is the vaccine given?

It is a series of 3 injections given within 6 months. You should receive all 3 doses to get full protection. Current data showed that it should be protective for at least 5 years. The need for a booster injection will depend on further research findings and is not yet known.

## Are there any side effects from the vaccine?

The vaccine is generally safe. The common side effects are similar to that from other vaccinations, such as soreness and swelling at the injection site, fever and headache. It should be avoided in pregnancy until more data on the safety in pregnancy are available. HPV vaccine is also not recommended for those who have ever had allergic reaction to any component of HPV vaccine.

## Who should have the vaccine?

The vaccine works best for women who have never been exposed to HPV infections. So, it should work best for women who have not started sexual activities. The vaccine can be given to girls as young as 9 and girls / women up to age 26, preferably at age 11-12. In women who have been sexually active, the effectiveness varies. Please consult your doctor for further information.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Is HPV the same thing as HIV?

No, they are not the same. Although both viruses can be sexually transmitted-HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and HPV give rise to different symptoms and diseases.

### Does HPV lead to breast cancer?

No. Despite the similarity of their names in Chinese, HPV is not related to breast cancer.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### Is HPV always sexually transmitted?

Genital HPV (which causes cervical cancer) is most commonly sexually transmitted. Rarely, a pregnant woman may pass on the infection to her baby.

### Do I need to continue with regular smear tests after vaccination against HPV?

Yes, because the current vaccine only protects against 70% of cervical cancer caused by HPV types 16 and 18. You still need to have regular smears to detect any abnormal changes caused by the other high risk HPV types.

### Can HPV infection be treated?

The vaccine prevents HPV infection but it is not a treatment for women already infected with HPV. Currently, there is no effective treatment for HPV infection. But there are treatments for the health problems that are caused by HPV, such as genital warts, cervical cell changes and cervical cancer.

### What happens if I get pregnant after the 1st or 2nd injection? Do I need to terminate the pregnancy?

Preliminary research data suggest that the vaccine has no definite adverse effects on the pregnancy or the baby, so termination of pregnancy would not be recommended in general for this reason. You are advised to consult your doctor for further discussion.

### I am sexually active. Should I take the HPV test before deciding whether I should receive the vaccine?

Taking a HPV test before vaccination is not recommended since there are no reliable HPV typing tests that have been validated by large clinical trials available in the market at the moment. In addition, 50% of natural infections may be tested serologically negative in the laboratory setting.

# Vaccine against Cervical Cancer

