

Cervical cancer vaccination

What is cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer develops from cells lining the cervix, which is the canal that connects the uterus to the vagina. There are two main types - squamous cell cancer and adenocarcinoma, named after the cells that become cancerous. The disease is the second most common cancer in women under 35.

How will the vaccine prevent cervical cancer?

The primary cause of cervical cancer is a virus called Human Papillomavirus (HPV), which is a common infection transmitted through sexual intercourse.

Around 80% of sexually active women can expect to get an HPV infection at some point in their lives. The vaccine targets the two types of HPV that account for about 70% of cervical cancer cases and therefore cuts the risk of cervical cancer.

Does this mean an end to smear tests?

No. Smear testing would continue because of the gap between the age of vaccination and the age of first screening, and because the jab does not protect against all HPV strains that may cause the cancer. Women who have the vaccine after they start having sex will derive as much benefit as those who are vaccinated before they are sexually active and will require continuing screening

Why vaccinate 9 to 26 year-old girls?

Recent studies of more than 20,000 women worldwide found that, for virgins, vaccines are 99% effective against the two HPV strains that cause most cases of cancer. When the data included women who may have already been exposed to the sexually transmitted virus, the effectiveness falls to 44%. Hence, the best time for vaccination would be before they get sexually active.

Has anyone thought about vaccinating men and boys, too?

In men, HPV causes genital warts and has been linked to penile and anal cancer. Plus, of course, men can transmit HPV to women. Data showed safety and immune response in 9- to 15-year-old boys and found that they have a slightly better immune response than girls and women. What we don't know yet is whether the vaccine will protect against infection and disease caused by HPV in young men. To answer that question, pharmaceutical company is conducting a clinical trial in men as old as 26 and expects to complete it in 2008.