

## Quick Sheet: The HPV Vaccine



### *What is HPV?*

The Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the US and is spread by skin-to-skin contact, most often during sexual intercourse. There are hundreds of different strains of the HPV virus. Nearly 1 in 2 people in the US is infected with HPV.

### *What does HPV cause?*

Some HPV strains lead to genital warts and others can lead to precancerous lesions on the cervix.

The vast majority of these infections do not cause any symptoms and usually clear on their own, but persistent infection with select “high risk” strains can lead to cervical cancer. Over 3,000 women die every year from cervical cancer in the United States. Women who do not develop cervical cancer can develop other reproductive health problems that can affect their ability to carry a pregnancy to term.

### *What is the HPV vaccine?*

In June 2006, the FDA approved Merck’s HPV vaccine, *Gardasil* for females ages 9-26. *Gardasil* protects against four HPV strains that cause 70% of all cervical cancer cases and 90% of all genital warts. The CDC has recommended routine vaccination of 11 and 12 year old girls, with vaccines offered to females between the ages 9 and 26. The goal is to vaccinate girls before the onset of sexual activity. More research is needed to determine if booster shots will be necessary and to determine the vaccine’s efficacy in males.

*Gardasil* is an expensive vaccine, with the full three dose series costing a total of \$360, not including administrative and doctor’s fees. Many providers have voiced concerns over the cost and their inability to stock the vaccine or offer it to patients.

The federal Vaccines for Children Program (VFC) will help promote coverage for uninsured children and most private insurance will cover the vaccine for children under 18. However, there are concerns about how women ages 19 to 26 will afford the vaccine since Medicaid and private insurance do not usually cover vaccines for adults.

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## The HPV Vaccine

*In addition to the vaccine, how else can people protect themselves from HPV and cervical cancer?*

Pap tests are an essential screening tool for HPV. All women must continue to get pap tests even if they get the vaccine to fully protect themselves. Cervical cancer and lack of access to regular pap screenings continue to pose a serious public health threat in New York.

In New York City, 20% of women say they do not get regular Pap tests. This proportion increases significantly among foreign-born women.

*What can be done to ensure people have access to the HPV vaccine?*

NARAL Pro-Choice New York supports efforts to make the vaccine universally available to all who want it. This includes supporting: education programs to inform people about HPV and the vaccine; insurance coverage for the vaccine; and, public funding to insure all women can afford this life saving vaccine.

Educate yourself and your family and friends about HPV. Many people do not know about HPV or that it causes cancer. Everyone should be fully informed about the vaccine and its benefits.

Demand universal access for this vaccine. No one should be denied access to this life saving vaccine because they cannot afford it or access it.

In New York, the New York City Department of Health has already distributed more than 50,000 doses of the vaccine and Governor Eliot Spitzer has authorized over two million dollars to support education and outreach efforts on



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