Part of good sexuality education is giving your daughter the tools to stay healthy and to lower, as much as she can, her chances of getting any STI, including HPV. So be sure to tell her: 

“It’s better to wait until you are at least 18 before having vaginal sex.”

You may have personal reasons why you want your daughter to wait. There are also health reasons. The cells on the cervix are immature and can get infected more easily with high-risk HPV before age 18 through unprotected vaginal sex.

“If you have sex, you need to use condoms every time.”

Condoms offer good protection against the bacteria and viruses that cause STIs for the body parts that are covered. This includes HPV. Of course, people need to know how to use condoms properly and how to talk about using them.

“It is important to have regular Pap tests and Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) tests.”

Every female needs to start having Pap tests within three years of her first vaginal sexual activity, whether with a male or female partner. It is also important to get an annual STI test or whenever you have a new sex partner. You may need to find out if regular Pap testing and follow-ups are available where you live. Often health units, schools, and community agencies have special clinics for teenagers.

Because it is easier for the body to clear HPV when it is healthy, there are some general health messages your daughter needs to hear, too:

“Please don’t smoke. Nicotine goes straight to the cervix.”

Smoking is a factor in the development of cancer of the cervix. Girls already know they’re not supposed to smoke because of other cancers. This is one more reason.

“Eat well, get rest, exercise, manage stress.”

These are some of the strategies for lowering the chances of getting an infection that could lead to cervical cancer. Vaccines are another. Gardasil is the vaccine that is currently available.

The Gardasil Vaccine and HPV

The research available to date on Gardasil tells us that the vaccine is very effective in preventing infections with HPV types 6 and 11 that cause the majority of genital warts, and with types 16 and 18 that cause the majority of cases of cervical cancer. Gardasil has been shown to be very effective in preventing the cell changes in the cervix that can lead to cervical cancer. By preventing these...
cell changes, it is believed likely that cervical cancer will be prevented. However, because cervical cancer is slow growing, usually taking up to ten years to develop, it is too early to know for sure if Gardasil will prevent cervical or other cancers and, more importantly, reduce the chances of death from it.

**Some important points to keep in mind:**

- The vaccine is not a treatment or a cure for either genital warts or cervical cancer.
- The vaccine is not nearly as effective if a girl or woman has already had sexual contact.
- The vaccine will not stop abnormal cells or cancer from forming if a person already has an HPV infection.

Gardasil is normally given in three separate shots over the course of a school year. In terms of short-term side effects of the vaccine, they do not seem to be very different from other vaccines. Side effects that we know about can include fainting, pain and swelling at the injection site (the arm), headache, nausea and fever. Other more serious adverse effects that have been found in girls who have received the vaccine are in small enough numbers that it is difficult to determine if it is the vaccine causing the problem. Because the vaccine is so new, there may be things we do not know about its long-term safety.

The longest clinical trial for Gardasil was six years. From this, we know that Gardasil appears to be effective for up to about six years. However, we do not yet know for how many years longer the protection will last. As with many other vaccines (e.g., chicken pox, mumps, and tetanus vaccines), your daughter may need to receive—and pay for—a booster shot in the future, perhaps in ten years. Research is ongoing about this.

Gardasil vaccine protects specifically against two of the approximately 13 known high-risk types of HPV (Type 16 and Type 18). Although research done to date suggests that these are present in 70 per cent of the cervical cancers studied, we do not know if these types are the most common ones in all communities in Canada. This missing information is important because the effectiveness promised by the vaccine is based on assumptions about the frequency of Types 16 and 18. In fact, other HPV vaccines that include more high-risk HPV types are being developed.

Gardasil is a very expensive vaccine that local governments are now offering free to young girls. This opportunity is making some parents feel pressured to allow their daughter to have it immediately.

Your daughter needs to know exactly what the vaccine can and cannot do to protect her. Some girls think they are going to be protected from all STIs, including HIV/AIDS. They need reminders that the HPV vaccine only protects against certain strains of HPV, not all, and it does not protect against any other common STIs. Moreover, girls and women need to remember that they must continue to have Pap tests and pelvic exams even if they’ve been vaccinated. If women do stop or reduce their screening, they may miss an early cancer and miss an opportunity to find out about other issues such as gonorrhea or chlamydia infections.

So, no matter what you and your daughter decide, she will still need to:
- practise safer sex
- have regular pelvic exams with Pap and STI testing
- do what she can to stay healthy

**Vaccine or no vaccine?**

The decision is up to each of us, in discussion with our daughters. Based on the research that has been done so far, Gardasil is currently considered as safe as other vaccines. It is effective against four specific HPV types for at least six years. Vaccination is not the only strategy for reducing the risk of getting cervical cancer, but Public Health officials believe it can be an important one in avoiding its development. If your daughter gets the vaccine, you will both need to keep updated on the research about the vaccine—especially about how long it lasts and if she will need a booster.

If your daughter does not get the vaccine, she will have to do exactly what girls who get the vaccine have to do: be careful, and have regular Pap tests.

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**Additional materials that may be helpful in your decision-making:**


- Ten Good Reasons to Be Concerned About the Human Papillomavirus Vaccination Campaign

  Prepared by the Fédération du Québec pour le planning des naissances. English version to be posted at [www.cwhn.ca](http://www.cwhn.ca) and [www.who-apsf.ca](http://www.who-apsf.ca)


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Research about Gardasil, HPV, and cervical cancer is ongoing. To keep up-to-date with the latest information, you can check with your provincial or territorial Health Department, and the websites of the CWHN and Women and Health Protection.

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