

June 12, 2008

Government approves vaccine program to protect girls from cancer

Edmonton ... The Alberta government will be taking action to prevent the majority of cervical cancers. All girls entering grade 5 in September 2008 will be eligible to receive a vaccine that will prevent 70 per cent of cervical cancers. Grade 9 girls will also be eligible for the vaccine from September 2009 to June 2012.

“The recently approved HPV (Human Papillomavirus) vaccine will help to protect the health of future generations of women in Alberta from an illness that has affected far too many until now,” said Dr. Raj Sherman, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health and Wellness. “Preventing illness and keeping Albertans well remains our first goal.”

HPV infection is common - 70 per cent of adults will have HPV at some point in their lives. The infection most often clears on its own within two years. For some however, the infection can become chronic, leading to cervical changes, and possibly cancer. The link between HPV and cervical cancer is now clearly understood.

Each year in Alberta, approximately 180 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and 40 will die. There are over 100 types of HPV. The vaccine protects against four types of HPV, two of which cause 70 per cent of cervical cancers and two of which cause 90 per cent of genital warts. The vaccine has been licensed in Canada since 2006 for use in females aged nine to 26 years.

The evidence shows the vaccine is safe, and most effective when given early. Three doses of the vaccine are required to achieve immunity. Immunizations will be delivered by local health regions in schools during the school year. Parents will be receiving information from the school, and will be asked for their consent before their child is immunized.

“This voluntary immunization program is really about taking preventive action to keep our female students healthy as they grow into young, successful adults,” stated Education Minister Dave Hancock. “Local school authorities already work in conjunction with local public health officials on the current Hepatitis B immunization program in place for Grade 5 students, and will ensure appropriate information is available to parents regarding the HPV vaccine.”

“The HPV vaccine is an important addition to our current efforts to combat cervical cancer,” said Dr. Tony Fields, Vice President Medical Affairs and Community Oncology, Alberta Cancer Board. “Immunization will complement Alberta’s Cervical Cancer Screening Program. As the vaccine does not prevent all cancer-causing types of the virus, early detection of pre-cancerous cells will remain key.”

The HPV vaccine is currently being used in 93 countries around the world, including the US, Australia, New Zealand, the UK and most European and Scandinavian countries. Over 20 million doses have been given worldwide, with very few serious adverse reactions reported. For more information on HPV vaccine and other vaccines offered through Alberta’s Routine Immunization Program, please visit www.health.alberta.ca, or call your local public health unit.

Backgrounder attached

Media enquiries north of Red Deer may be directed to:

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To call toll free within Alberta dial 310-0000.

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Frequently asked questions about Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

What is human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a very common family of viruses with over 100 different types that spread through sexual contact, causing skin warts, genital warts and certain kinds of cancer, most commonly cervical cancer. About 40 HPV types cause infections in the genital area, making HPV the most common sexually transmitted infection.

Most HPV infections cause no symptoms, and individuals don't know they are infected. Usually, HPV infections go away by themselves, but it may take one to two years for the infection to disappear. Some types of the virus are called high-risk because they can cause cervical cancer. Approximately one in ten women affected with cancer-causing HPV types has infection that does not go away. These long-lasting infections may lead to changes in the cells of the lining of the cervix, cervical cancer and other more rare types of cancer.

There is no cure for HPV infection. However, treatment is available for the diseases caused by HPV infection - in particular, cervical cancer if it is identified early.

What is cervical cancer and how is it related to HPV?

Cervical cancer (cancer of the cervix) is a malignant disease of the cells lining the cervix. Every year in Canada approximately 1,350 new cases of cervical cancer are identified, and about 390 women die of the disease. In Alberta, roughly 180 cases of cervical cancer are diagnosed and about 40 women with the disease die each year.

Studies over the past 15 years have shown that almost all cases of cervical cancer are linked to an infection with HPV. It can take 10 years or more for the infection to gradually progress to pre-cancerous and cancerous lesions of the cervix. Early detection of cervical cancer increases the likelihood of effective treatment, but prevention of the disease is best.

Two types of HPV, type 16 and type 18, have been shown to cause about 70 per cent of cervical cancers. The HPV vaccine protects against both of these types.

Is HPV infection a new disease?

No, HPV infection has been known for a long time. However, within the past few years the relationship between HPV infection and cervical cancer has been established.

Can HPV infection be treated?

No, there are no treatments available for HPV infection. However, treatments are available for the diseases caused by the virus. In particular, cervical cancer can be treated if identified early. Preventing HPV infections and cervical cancer is preferred.

Can HPV infection be prevented?

With the licensing of HPV vaccine, there is an effective way to prevent infection with some types of HPV and most cases of cervical cancer.

What is HPV Vaccine?

GARDASIL®, HPV vaccine, was licensed in Canada in July 2006 for use in girls and women 9 years to 26 years of age. The vaccine provides protection from four types of HPV, including HPV types 16 and

18 which have been linked to about 70 per cent of cervical cancer cases. The other two HPV types in the vaccine, 6 and 11, have been identified as the cause of 90 per cent of genital warts. The HPV vaccine has shown excellent results in preventing infection with these four types of the virus. In studies, the highest immune responses were seen in girls nine to 14 years of age.

Is HPV vaccine safe?

Yes, the vaccine is safe. HPV vaccines have been in development for several years. Girls and women around the world (North America, Latin America, Europe and Asian-Pacific regions) have received the vaccine, with very few reports of serious adverse reactions.

Vaccines are approved for use in Canada only after rigorous review and testing for quality, safety and effectiveness. After a vaccine is licensed, ongoing monitoring is conducted to ensure continued safety and efficacy. The HPV vaccine does not contain antibiotics or preservatives.

Will booster shots be necessary?

Recent studies have indicated that the HPV vaccine provides good protection for at least five years after immunization with three doses of the vaccine. Studies are ongoing to determine if protection will be life long or if booster doses will be needed in the future to ensure long-term protection.

Why is this vaccine offered as a school-based program to girls?

The Canadian Immunization Committee (CIC) and the Alberta Advisory Committee on Communicable Disease Control recommended that the vaccine be provided routinely to girls in one grade between Grades 4 and 8. Alberta has chosen to offer a catch up program for Grade 9 girls, for three years beginning September 2009.

This immunization program is most effective when given to girls in this age group. Girls, who have not yet been exposed to HPV, will get the full benefit of the vaccine with protection from all four HPV vaccine types. The vaccine is given in a series of three doses over a six-month period. School-based immunization delivery systems generally result in higher numbers of students completing immunization.

HPV immunization for Grade 5 girls will be given at the same time as hepatitis B vaccine which is routinely offered to all students in grade five in Alberta. In addition, Grade 9 girls will be eligible to receive the vaccine for three years beginning in September 2009.

What about vaccine for older girls who have already completed Grade 5?

The publicly-funded Alberta HPV Immunization Program is for all girls in grade five beginning in the 2008-09 school year, and Grade 9 girls beginning in September 2009 for a three-year period. However, the vaccine is licensed for girls and women nine to 26 years of age. Any girls not eligible under this program can speak to their doctor or health care provider about purchasing the vaccine.

For more information on cervical cancer screening, please talk to your family doctor, or visit: <http://www.cancerboard.ab.ca/accsp/>.

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