

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

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In news

World Health Organization is introducing and scaling up testing for human papillomavirus as part of a comprehensive programme for prevention and control of cervical cancer

What is Human Papillomavirus?

- Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common viral infection of the reproductive tract. Most sexually active women and men will be infected at some point in their lives and some may be repeatedly infected
- It is a viral infection which is passed between people through skin-to-skin contact.
- There are more than 100 types of HPV, of which at least 14 are cancer-causing (also known as high risk type)
- HPV is mainly transmitted through sexual contact and most people are infected with HPV shortly after the onset of sexual activity.
- The infection with certain HPV types also causes a proportion of cancers of the anus, vulva, vagina, penis and oropharynx, which are preventable using similar primary prevention strategies as those for cervical cancer.

HPV and Cancer

- Cervical cancer is by far the most common HPV-related disease. Nearly all cases of cervical cancer can be attributable to HPV infection.
- Cervical cancer is caused by sexually acquired infection with certain types of HPV.
- Two HPV types (16 and 18) cause 70% of cervical cancers and pre-cancerous cervical lesions.
- Vaccines that protect against HPV 16 and 18 are

recommended by WHO and have been approved for use in many countries.

- HPV infections usually clear up without any intervention within a few months after acquisition, and about 90% clear within 2 years. A small proportion of infections with certain types of HPV can persist and progress to cervical cancer.

The global strategy towards eliminating cervical cancer

The Global strategy towards eliminating cervical cancer as a public health problem adopted by the WHA in 2020, recommends a comprehensive approach to cervical cancer prevention and control. The recommended set of actions includes interventions across the life course.

HPV vaccination

- There are currently 3 vaccines that have been prequalified, all protecting against both HPV 16 and 18, which are known to cause at least 70% of cervical cancers.
- The third vaccine protects against five additional oncogenic HPV types, which cause a further 20% of cervical cancers.
- Given that the vaccines which are only protecting against HPV 16 and 18 also have some cross-protection against these other less common HPV types which cause cervical cancer