

HPV Immunisation Programme

September 2008

The countdown is on to the start of the HPV (Human papillomavirus) Immunisation Programme, which aims to prevent HPV infection and reduce the number of women in New Zealand who develop cervical cancer.

From 1 September, the free vaccinations are available for girls born in 1990 and 1991 from their family doctor, practice nurse, Maori or Pacific providers, youth health services, and other health clinics and settings.

The Ministry of Health's Senior Advisor in Public Health Medicine, Dr Alison Roberts says, "This programme provides an opportunity for young women to be protected against the virus that causes most cervical cancers. It is an investment in protecting future generations."

The Gardasil vaccine is shown to be safe in large clinical trials involving more than 20,000 girls and young women. Results from the ongoing studies show that five years after vaccination protection remains good, and the vaccine prevented infection with HPV in 96 percent of women. These studies will continue to monitor the long term protection, but at this stage international experts do not expect that a booster dose will be needed.

"In the long term, it is expected that about 30 lives a year will be saved. And there will be fewer abnormal smear results, which means less stress for those women who may require extra tests, diagnoses and invasive treatments.

"For best protection, girls should be vaccinated before they are likely to be exposed to HPV, which means before they start having any sexual contact. But we still recommend that women who are eligible for the programme get the vaccine even if they have been sexually active because they are unlikely to have been exposed to all the HPV types that the vaccine protects against."

Dr Roberts says, "Young women who complete the three-dose course, will still need cervical smear tests when they get older as the vaccine does not protect against all of the causes of cervical cancer."

A key part of the programme is the resources and social marketing campaign which will guide people to credible sources of information to support informed decision-making.

Next year, the programme will begin for younger women, from the age of 12. The vaccinations will be available through a combination of schools and the primary care settings."

More information about the HPV Immunisation Programme is available at www.moh.govt.nz/immunisation