

Get the Shot

The HPV vaccine isn't just for straight girls. Dr. Jeanne Mrazzco tells us why.

By Heather Boerner

HPV vaccine? Aren't you already immune simply because you don't have sex with men?

Not so fast.

Research shows that queer women are just as likely to have HPV as other women. There are about 100 strains of HPV, and about 10 of those can cause cervical cancer. The new vaccine, called Gardasil, protects against four strains: two that cause genital warts, and two that cause 70 percent of the cervical cancer cases in the United States.

Jeanne Mrazzco, a doctor at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, has for years studied the epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections in women who have sex with women. An out lesbian, she dedicates her research to exploring the spread of HPV and other infections between women, and runs the site LesbianSTD.com.

It's long been believed that women who sleep with women can't get HPV. Is that true?

It could not be more false. Women definitely transmit HPV to each other. It's a virus that's effectively transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, so it can probably be transmitted on hands and sex toys. The studies we've done and others have done found these same types of HPV on queer women — and we found them at the cervix as well as the vagina. That means they're getting in there from female partners and getting to the cervix. Thinking that queer women can't spread it to each other is a recipe for disaster.

Why is this vaccine important for queer women?

I think for women's health in general, this vaccine is a huge advance in terms of controlling a deadly genital cancer. For lesbians, it's especially important because research shows that lesbians don't get Pap smears as often. They don't have reasons to go to the doctor in terms of getting birth control. This is one more thing that can protect them.

Who should get the HPV vaccine?

It's recommended for women between ages 9 and 25. It has been studied in women older than 25, but it's important to try to vaccinate women before they acquire these particular viruses. HPV is so common among women — by age 50, 80 percent of all women will have HPV — that vaccination needs to happen before women become sexually active.

Even if you've already had an abnormal Pap or had sex, you can still get the vaccine. Doctors can't tell what types of the virus you have, so the vaccine may protect you from types you don't have.



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How does the vaccine work?

The vaccine is \$360 for a course of three shots. It's given in three different shots over a six-month time period. It's done that way because your body requires more than one dose before it generates a response. That's what creates the immunity to it. You get it at the first appointment, then two months later, and then four months after that. It's approved for anyone who doesn't have a reaction to the components of the vaccine, but the vaccine is pretty well tolerated by most people. It's not the kind of vaccine you have to restart if you miss a dose. It's best to have all three shots in a six-month time frame, but if you can't get there for some reason, you can get the shot later. Not being able to get the shot in the six-month time frame is not a reason not to go back.

It's also important for queer women, when they go to their doctors, to educate their doctors about this disease, that it can be spread woman to woman. A lot of doctors still don't know. ■

Where to Get the Shot

Now you want it, so how do you get it? Dr. Jeanne Marrazzo has suggestions:

- **Talk to your doctor.** If you have medical insurance and a regular doctor, talk to your doctor about whether she carries it and whether it's available.
- **Talk to your insurance provider.** If you have health insurance, give your provider a call. Ask if they cover the vaccine. Because it has the potential to save millions of dollars in treatment costs, Marrazzo said she suspects that most insurance carriers will happily foot the bill.
- **Visit a community clinic.** If you don't have insurance, call your local community clinic to find out whether they offer the shot and if it's available on a sliding scale.
- **Call your county health department.** Local government agencies can give you a sense of where the vaccine is available and whether it's available at a discounted price.

Ways to Save

If you don't have insurance but want the vaccine, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies are working to make the vaccine affordable for you. Check out these programs before you pay full price.

Advisory Committee of Immunization Practices

What: Partner of the CDC that helps set policy and offers grants to ensure that low-income and underrepresented groups have access to health vaccines.

Who: At press time, the ACIP had not yet set its policy, but Marrazzo said the group is considering offering reduced-cost vaccines to women 18 and under from Native American backgrounds.

Merck Pharmaceuticals

What: The drug company that developed Gardasil.

Who: Merck is developing a program to make the vaccine available at a discounted price to women over 18 who make less than 200 percent of poverty level in your state.