



## Question and Answers for Public Health Professionals on Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and HPV Vaccine

### About Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

#### What is HPV?

HPV is a virus that can affect the skin or mucosa of the anus, genital area and the digestive tract. There are over 100 types of the virus and approximately 40 affect the human anogenital area.

- Some types can cause warts on the genital area and can usually be seen – these are often referred to as “low-risk” types
- Other types can cause abnormal cell changes on the cervix and cannot be seen – these may eventually lead to cancer and are often referred to as “high-risk” types

HPV infections are transmitted sexually by direct skin or mucosa contact. They may also be transmitted vertically to a newborn exposed to the virus in the mother’s genital tract.

Some types of HPV are vaccine preventable.

The high-risk HPV types 16 and 18 cause 70% of cervical cancer and the low-risk HPV types 6 and 11, cause 90% of cases of genital warts.

#### Is HPV common in Canada?

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI). HPV infections affect both women and men of all ages.

The National Advisory Committee on Immunization (NACI) estimated that the overall prevalence of HPV in Canada is between 11-29%. The peak prevalence tends to occur in adolescents and young adults, rising rapidly after the onset of sexual activity and then declining with age.

The majority of HPV infections (more than 80%) clear spontaneously within 12-24 months.

#### Is HPV linked to cervical cancer?

Persistent infections with high-risk HPV may lead to cervical cancer. High-risk HPV is also associated with numerous other (although infrequent) cancers of the penis, anus, vulva and vagina, as well as head/neck and oral cancers. This process may take decades.

In Canada, the cervical cancer incidence rate is estimated to be 7.3 cases per 100,000 women (2007) making it the 3<sup>rd</sup> most common cancer in Canadian women aged 20-44 years.

In New Brunswick, there are about 40 new cases of cervical cancer and 15 associated deaths every year.

#### What are the risk factors for HPV?

The key determinants for HPV infection for both males and females are related to sexual behavior. They include:

- Initiating sexual activity at a young age
- Having a high number of sexual partners in a lifetime
- Having sexual partners who have or had multiple sexual partners

Other reported risk factors include smoking, long-term use of oral contraceptives, presence of other STIs, inadequate diet and immunosuppression.

#### Can the risk of contracting HPV be reduced?

The surest way to eliminate the risk of contracting an HPV infection is to avoid any genital contact with another individual.

Delaying initiation of sexual activity defers the risk of contracting HPV.

For those who choose to be sexually active, a long-term monogamous relationship or sexual contacts with an uninfected partner are most likely to prevent the risk of contracting HPV.

Although condom use is thought to be associated with a lower rate of cervical cancer, it is not known how much protection condoms provide against HPV infection.

Considering all risk factors, the best current method thought to prevent high-risk HPV is IMMUNIZATION. However, not all HPV types are vaccine-preventable; therefore, **it is essential that even vaccinated women continue to get a Pap test as recommended. Women who are sexually active or 18 years of age, whichever comes first, should undergo an annual Pap test. New Brunswick is in the process of planning a provincial cervical screening program.**