

Thousands more young people urged to take up HPV vaccine to meet NHS cervical cancer elimination goal

Published 1/23/2024

The NHS is urging young people and parents of 12 and 13-year-olds to ensure they consent to having the HPV vaccine, as new figures out today show around one in six girls and one in five boys are not fully vaccinated by year 10.

Vaccinating both girls and boys against HPV in schools and community clinics is helping the NHS reach its pledge to eliminate cervical cancer by 2040.

The latest statistics from UKHSA for the academic year 2022/23, show that while uptake for girls and boys in year 8 slightly increased when compared to 2021-22, it has dropped in years 9 and 10.

The HPV vaccine is offered to all 12-13 years olds in schools and community clinics, with parents required to consent to their child getting the jab from NHS nurses.

Following updated guidance last year, the NHS updated its HPV vaccination programme to a single dose instead of two doses for most under 25s, making it easier than ever for young people and parents of 12-13 year olds to ensure they are protected.

The HPV vaccine helps protect against a range of cancers, including cervical, head and neck, anal and genital cancers, which can affect both boys and girls.

Last year, the NHS pledged to eliminate cervical cancer by 2040 for the first time ever, which could save thousands of lives every year in England, but this relies on as many young people as possible getting the lifesaving HPV vaccination and increasing cervical screening uptake.

As well as urging young people to take up the offer, the NHS is taking action to increase vaccination and screening uptake across the country. As part of new plans, the NHS is supporting health and care professionals in identifying those who most need the vaccine through targeted outreach and offering jabs in more convenient settings.

Steve Russell, national director for vaccinations and screening for NHS England, said: "The successful HPV vaccination programme already helps save thousands of lives, but through increasing uptake in young people alongside boosting the numbers coming forward for cervical screening, the NHS in England hopes to eliminate cervical cancer by 2040.

"Today's figures show that at the end of this academic year, over 500,000 girls and boys have been vaccinated with a dose of protection against the virus by the end of year 10, however, there are over 50,000 girls and over 70,000 boys in year 10 who were unvaccinated against HPV, so we're urging parents of young people eligible for a vaccine to consent to their children getting their HPV vaccines from nurses when they visit schools.

"With just one dose now offering full protection to under 25s, it is easier than ever to ensure your child is fully protected – so please do check your child's vaccination status and consent for them to get vaccinated if they aren't up to date – vaccination saves lives."

Women coming forward for their routine cervical screening appointments is also essential in helping to eliminate cervical cancer. Currently, a third of women invited do not take up the offer.

NHS screening helps prevent cervical cancer by using a highly effective test to check for high-risk HPV, which may cause abnormal cells to develop in the cervix. These abnormal cells can, over time, turn into cancer if left untreated.

Alongside its vaccination drive, the NHS is urging women to come for their cervical screening, while self-sampling will be trialled to determine if it could be introduced as part of national screening.

The World Health Organisation considers cervical cancer to be eliminated as a public health problem when there is an incidence rate lower than four per 100,000 women.

Today's stats show that in the academic year 2022/23, uptake for boys and girls in year 8 slightly increased when compared to 2021-22, but uptake has dropped in years 9 and 10 (year 9 girls went from 82.2% to 75.7%, year 10 girls went from 86.5% to 83.2%, year 9 boys went from 77.6% to 69.7% and year 10 boys went from 81.5% to 78.6%).

If you are concerned that you or your child has missed out on the HPV vaccine, please contact your child's school nurse, school aged vaccination service or the Kent Community Health Immunisation Team to find out more.

Dr Vanessa Saliba, Consultant Epidemiologist at the UK Health Security Agency, said:

"The HPV vaccination programme is one of the most successful in the world with millions of doses given since it started in 2008. It has dramatically lowered the rates of cervical cancer and harmful infections in both women and men – preventing many cancers and saving lives.

"All girls and boys in Year 8 are eligible for the HPV vaccine and evidence now shows that one dose gives excellent protection. We urge everyone who is eligible to take up this potentially lifesaving vaccine when offered.

"If you missed your HPV vaccine contact your school nurse, school immunisation team or the Kent Community Health Immunisation Team to arrange a catch-up."