

## HPV Vaccination: Protecting Future Generations, Not Harming Fertility



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The introduction of HPV vaccination in Pakistan has been met with both hope and hesitation. One of the most widespread myths claims that the vaccine causes infertility in young girls. Despite the fears, global scientific research and decades of experience confirm that this belief is baseless.

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection worldwide.

More than 80% of sexually active people will encounter it at least once in their lifetime. While many infections clear naturally, high-risk types such as HPV16 and HPV18 can persist and cause cancers. Nobel laureate Harald zur Hausen first linked HPV to cervical cancer in the 1980s, discovering viral DNA in 70% of cervical tumors. Today, HPV is known to cause not only cervical cancer but also anal, penile, vulvar, oropharyngeal, and throat cancers.

Globally, HPV leads to over 600,000 new cancer cases and more than 340,000 deaths annually, according to WHO. In Pakistan, around 5,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year, with 60% not surviving. Alarmingly, eight women die daily from this preventable disease.

The first HPV vaccine, Gardasil, was approved in 2006, followed by Cervarix in 2009 and Gardasil 9 in 2014, which targets nine HPV strains. Countries such as Australia and New Zealand, where vaccination rates are high, have already seen a 90% drop in cervical precancer and genital warts. Their goal is to eradicate cervical cancer by 2035.

WHO, UNICEF, and Gavi have since expanded the campaign to 150 countries, including Pakistan, to protect over 70 million women. Projections show 17 million lives could be saved by 2027.

Parents often worry that the HPV vaccine might impair fertility. Yet, more than 120 million doses have been administered globally without any evidence of infertility. Documented side effects remain minor temporary pain, fever, fatigue, or fainting no different from other routine vaccines. In contrast, rejecting vaccination poses a real fertility risk: untreated cervical cancer or HPV-related complications can damage reproductive health. In this context, avoiding the vaccine actually increases the chances of infertility.

HPV affects men as well, causing penile and throat cancers. However, because women face higher risks of persistent infection and cervical cancer, vaccination campaigns prioritize young girls. Still, vaccinating boys is strongly recommended, as it reduces transmission and builds herd immunity. In Pakistan, boys can receive the vaccine privately, even if the government program currently targets girls.

Some parents also question why international organizations are funding free vaccination in Pakistan. The answer lies in public health strategy: HPV spreads easily across borders, and only global action can eradicate it. Experts compare it to spraying one field for pests while leaving the neighbouring field untreated without collective prevention, the problem simply returns.

The HPV vaccine is one of the most effective tools in modern medicine to prevent cancer. Myths about infertility are unfounded, while the dangers of HPV are well-documented. Parents have a

responsibility to protect their daughters and ideally sons through vaccination. Rather than resisting, they should support the efforts of the Government of Pakistan, WHO, Gavi, and UNICEF to ensure a healthier, cancer-free future for the next generation.