



HPV AND THE SECOND CHANCE: WHAT EVERY WOMAN NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT PROTECTION AND PREVENTION

Let's Talk About It.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) isn't a trendy health headline. It doesn't spark the same urgency as a heart attack or stroke. And yet, HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the world and it's silently behind more than 95% of cervical cancer cases.

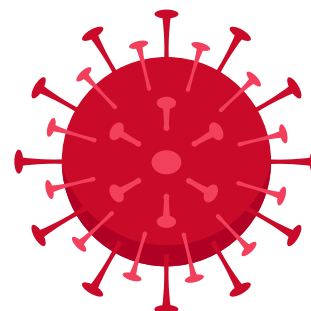
In South Africa, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among women, and disproportionately affects women who do not have regular access to screening and care. The good news? HPV is preventable. But prevention begins with understanding.

This isn't just a "school girl" conversation. It's a woman's health issue for teenagers, young professionals, mothers, and midlife women alike.

What Is HPV?

HPV is a group of viruses that infect skin and mucous membranes. There are over 100 types, but certain high-risk strains (particularly HPV 16 and 18) are known to cause:

- 🦠 Cervical cancer
- 🦠 Anal and vaginal cancers
- 🦠 Throat and mouth cancers
- 🦠 Genital warts



Most people will contract HPV at some point in their lives without ever knowing it, because the virus often shows no symptoms.

HPV and the Vaccine: Not Just for Teens

The HPV vaccine is most commonly given to girls aged 9–12 in public schools in South Africa, as part of the national school vaccination programme. This is because the vaccine is most effective before exposure to the virus.

But what if you missed it?

If you're a **teen, young woman**, or even in your **30s or early 40s**, you may **still be eligible** for HPV vaccination, depending on your age, medical history, and individual risk factors.

Vaccination in adulthood **won't treat an existing infection**, but it **can still protect you from future high-risk strains** you haven't been exposed to yet.

Speak to your healthcare provider, especially if you've never been vaccinated or don't know your status. Many private pharmacies and GPs in South Africa offer the vaccine for adult women (often under the name *Gardasil 9*).

If You are Not Vaccinated, What Can You Do?

Even if you're not eligible for the vaccine anymore, you are not powerless. Here's what you can do today to protect your long-term health:



1. Get Regular Cervical Screenings

- South African women aged 30 and older are advised to have a Pap smear every three years, or more frequently if at higher risk.
- If you are HIV-positive or immunocompromised, you should start screening earlier and more frequently.



2. Ask About HPV Testing

Many clinics now offer HPV-specific tests, which can identify high-risk strains before symptoms or abnormalities develop.



3. Use Protection

While condoms don't offer 100% protection from HPV, they reduce the risk of transmission, especially when used consistently.



4. Know the Symptoms

Most HPV infections are silent, but persistent infection can eventually lead to warning signs such as:

- Unusual vaginal bleeding
- Pelvic pain
- Discomfort during intercourse
- Visible genital warts

If you notice any of these, don't delay, see a doctor.

What About the Vaccine Rollout Right Now?

South Africa is currently in the second round of its 2025 HPV school vaccination campaign, targeting Grade 5 girls aged 9 and up. This second dose completes the series and strengthens long-term immunity.

If you're a parent or caregiver:

- Ask your child's school if they received the first dose.
- If you're unsure, or if the school didn't issue a consent form, contact your local clinic, don't assume you've missed your chance.
- The vaccine is free in public health and part of the Department of Health's cervical cancer prevention plan.



Addressing the Elephant in the Room: Vaccine Concerns

We understand: there's a lot of information out there, and not all of it is accurate. Here's what global and South African health authorities confirm:

- The HPV vaccine is safe and effective, with over 15 years of use and monitoring worldwide.
- It does not influence sexual behaviour, fertility, or hormone development.
- Common side effects include mild pain at the injection site, tiredness, or a low-grade fever, similar to other vaccines.

Still uncertain? That's okay. Speak to a healthcare provider you trust. Ask questions. Read from verified medical sources. Informed choice is your right.

The Bigger Picture

Group	What to Know
Young girls (9–12)	Most responsive to vaccine : free at public schools
Teens & young adults	Still eligible, especially under age 26
Women in their 30s–40s	May still benefit from vaccine, case-by-case
Unvaccinated adults	Should prioritise screening, safe sex, and awareness

Final Thoughts: It's Never Too Late to Take Charge

You may have missed the vaccine as a teen, but you haven't missed your chance to protect your health.

- Talk to your doctor.
- Keep up with screenings.
- Educate your daughters, nieces, and friends.
- And if you're eligible, consider the vaccine now.

Your health is not is important.

Your prevention matters.

And when it comes to HPV, knowledge really is power.



For more information, support and advice feel free to reach out to us on transneteap@mhg.co.za

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