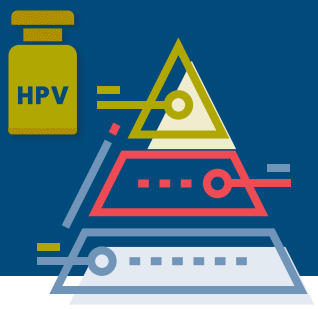
Why HPV Vaccines Remain a Critical Health Priority for Indonesia



Cervical cancer poses a significant burden, impacting thousands of women in Indonesia each year. The leading cause of this life-threatening disease is human papillomavirus (HPV), which can be widely prevented with the use of safe, effective vaccines. Indonesia has committed to introducing HPV vaccines as part of its routine immunization program, and this essential first step will protect millions of vulnerable girls against HPV and significantly reduce risk of cervical cancer later in life. Although many health priorities are important for securing a bright future for Indonesia's adolescents, establishing and maintaining a robust HPV vaccination program is critical to ensure that this lifesaving intervention is made widely available to advance women's health and protect girls across the country for decades to come.

HPV vaccines have the potential to protect millions of adolescent girls and women.

HPV is known to cause nearly all cases of cervical cancer, the second most common type of cancer among women in Indonesia (1). More than 36,000 Indonesian women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year, and this disease can be life-threatening if not detected and treated in its early stages. In Indonesia, more than 21,000 women die from cervical cancer each year – that means that more than 57 mothers, daughters, and sisters die each day from a devastating disease that is largely preventable.

WHO recommends that all girls between 9 and 14 years old should be vaccinated against HPV (2). This early window for immunization aims to prevent infection by preparing the immune system to fight the virus before a girl is potentially exposed, and preventing HPV infection will lower the risk of developing cervical cancer later in life. More than 100 million Indonesian women are at risk for cervical cancer (1), but implementing and sustaining an effective HPV vaccine program is one of the most effective ways to proactively reduce and ultimately eliminate the impact of this devastating disease.

Safe and effective HPV vaccines have already been efficiently delivered in parts of Indonesia.

Although national-level rollout is planned to take place in late 2023, HPV vaccines were successfully introduced at a smaller scale in various parts of the country several years ago. In 2016, a pilot program was implemented to provide adolescent girls with HPV vaccines in Jakarta, and this effort was expanded to cover several other areas including Yogyakarta, Bali, Makassar, and Manado. This pilot program was hugely successful, with estimated coverage rates greater than 90%, and many lessons learned from this program were documented to guide country-wide implementation (3).

The initial pilot program relied on a school-based platform for immunization and also included outreach to engage out-of-school girls. Nationwide scale-up of HPV vaccines will similarly be school-based with a focus during National Child Immunization Month (BIAS), when delivery efforts are intensified through campaigns to provide multiple lifesaving vaccines to children attending school. Tailored outreach strategies will need to be developed to ensure equitable access to HPV vaccines for young girls and vulnerable, hard-to-reach populations.

HPV vaccination is a cost-effective health investment.

In addition to the proven health benefits, HPV vaccination programs provide a significant economic advantage as vaccines are a highly cost-effective intervention. Studies have found that expanding HPV vaccines to all 10-year-old girls in Indonesia could potentially reduce the incidence of cervical cancer by as much as 94% (4). By averting tens of thousands of potential cervical cancer cases each year, Indonesia could see substantial reductions in the costs of treatment and care for women diagnosed with cervical cancer as well as significantly reduce the socio-economic impact of the disease. These significant cost savings highlight the power of HPV vaccines. The budgetary impact of a government-led national HPV vaccination program is a wise investment that would considerably offset and decrease the existing financial burden of cervical cancer.

Although HPV vaccines are seemingly more expensive than other routine childhood vaccines, updated analyses demonstrate that HPV vaccination is a cost-effective strategy for preventing cervical cancer in Indonesia (4). The potential influence of factors such as local vaccine production and the adoption of a single-dose schedule (2) may provide additional financial benefits if further gains to reduce or consolidate programmatic expenses can be made.

Next Steps for HPV Vaccination

When HPV vaccination is introduced nationwide in Indonesia, the work to support and advance HPV vaccine programs is far from over. Going forward, momentum must continue to push for HPV vaccination for all vulnerable groups in Indonesia and commitment will be needed to ensure that HPV vaccine advocacy continues. Successful program implementation will require multi-sector collaboration from partners working in immunization, child health, adolescent health, HIV/STIs, cancer, and reproductive health.

As the world works to mitigate and overcome troubling declines in routine immunization due to the COVID-19 pandemic, HPV vaccines must remain an urgent priority.

The lifesaving impact of HPV vaccination must continue to be emphasized in ongoing discussions with decision makers and politicians to ensure that HPV vaccines continue to be prioritized in policy decisions. Evidence to support the cost-effectiveness and clinical impact of HPV vaccination in Indonesia is available and should be leveraged in these discussions.

Prominent religious leaders and decision-makers in the Ministry of Religious Affairs must be engaged to convey the value of HPV vaccination. Educate and encourage these influential figures to disseminate accurate information in support of vaccination efforts.

Strategies to reach out-of-school girls and other hard-to-reach communities must be developed to ensure that all adolescent girls have access to this critical health intervention.

Training initiatives for education and health professionals, including community health workers and other community champions, must be created to provide tools and to combat harmful myths and misinformation surrounding HPV vaccines. Focusing on these key individuals will strengthen Indonesia's HPV vaccination efforts and ensure that support and motivation for this impactful intervention is sustained long-term.

Sources

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