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## **Alberta to offer HPV shots to girls**

*Province last to adopt program that prevents most cervical cancer*

*Emily Senger, The Edmonton Journal; With files from The Calgary Herald*

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EDMONTON - All Grade 5 girls in Alberta will now be offered protection against the sexually transmitted virus which causes most forms of cervical cancer and genital warts.

The provincial government announced Thursday it will fund the vaccine that protects against the four strains of human papillomavirus that cause 70 per cent of cervical cancers and 90 per cent of genital warts.

Parents will be asked to sign a consent form before their daughters receive the vaccine, which is administered in three shots over six months and is most effective before girls become sexually active.

Alberta is the last province in Canada to adopt an HPV vaccine program for school-aged girls.

Calgary gynecologist Dr. Brian Hauck praised the decision, saying it will save lives and reduce the number of women who contract genital warts, which he says can be psychologically devastating.

"The benefit just hugely, hugely outweighs any potential risk," said Hauck, who sits on the Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program's medical committee.

Dr. Raj Sherman, parliamentary assistant to Health Minister Ron Liepert, said about "180 women in Alberta are diagnosed with cervical cancer every year and 40 will die. We have something we can do about it."

The vaccine, which goes by the brand-name Gardasil, was approved by the federal government in July 2006.

The announcement comes nine months after federal Health Minister Tony Clement publicly called on Alberta to begin inoculations, noting Ottawa dedicated \$300 million to a national HPV vaccination program.

"We're pleased because it's been something we've been advocating the government do for a while now," said Capital Health medical officer Dr. Gerry Predy.

The vaccine will be offered beginning in September and will cost the Alberta government \$10 million per year, said Alberta Health and Wellness spokesman John Tuckwell.

Grade 9 girls will also be eligible for the vaccine for the next three years as part of a catch-up program, which will cost an additional \$10 million each year, Tuckwell said.

In September 2007, the Alberta Medical Association called on the provincial government to provide the vaccine. The health minister at the time said the government was still waiting for the Canadian Immunization Committee to release results of a review into the drug's effectiveness. Other organizations, including the Canadian Cancer Society and the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, also support the vaccine.

The government approved the fund after the reviews were complete, Tuckwell said.

Girls and women up to age 26 who are not eligible for the program can buy the vaccine through Capital Health for \$175 for each of the three shots.

Health Canada says initial trials show Gardasil is effective for at least five years. Doctors in Alberta will monitor the drug's long-term effectiveness after that five-year period ends.

"With any vaccine, when it is introduced, you don't know about the duration of protection," Predy said.

Health Canada estimates 75 per cent of sexually active men and women will contract HPV at least once, although not all instances develop into genital warts or cancer.

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