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Review Article

Protecting Women's Health Through HPV Vaccination: Evidence, Implementation Challenges, and the Path to Cervical Cancer Elimination

Basit Fazal^{1*}, MD Javed Karim², Pankaj Kumar³, MD. Khalid³, Mohammed Shadab Shahab⁴, Md Ghazi Moazzam⁵, Debankini Dasgupta⁶ and Shwetlana Bandyopadhyay⁶

¹Department of Pharmacology, Nibha Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Rajgir, India

²Department of Pharmacy, Bhabha University, Bhopal, India

³Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Nibha Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Rajgir, India

⁴Department of Pharmaceutics, Nibha Institute of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Rajgir, India

⁵Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry, Shakuni Choudhary College of Health and Sciences, Tarapur, India

⁶Department of Pharmacy, MGM College of Pharmacy, Patna, India

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*Corresponding author:

Basit Fazal, Department of Pharmacology,
Nibha Institute of Pharmaceutical
Sciences, Rajgir, India.

ABSTRACT

Cervical cancer is a largely preventable malignancy caused predominantly by persistent infection with oncogenic human papillomavirus (HPV). It remains a major women's health and health-equity problem, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where vaccination, screening and treatment services are unevenly distributed. The supplied thesis emphasizes the central role of high-risk HPV, especially HPV-16 and HPV-18, the long natural history from infection to cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) and invasive cancer, and the importance of integrating vaccination with screening, early diagnosis and treatment. Current global evidence reinforces this framework: the World Health Organization (WHO) identifies HPV vaccination as a foundational pillar of cervical cancer elimination and recommends a simplified one- or two-dose approach for many immunocompetent adolescents and young adults, while retaining at least two doses—and preferably three where feasible—for immunocompromised people and those living with HIV. HPV vaccines are non-infectious virus-like-particle vaccines that induce strong neutralizing antibody responses and have demonstrated substantial reductions in HPV infection, precancer and invasive cervical cancer. HPV DNA testing is now preferred by WHO for primary screening, and self-sampling can improve acceptability and access. The most important barriers are vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, affordability, weak delivery systems, limited screening capacity and inequities affecting rural and underserved populations. India carries a substantial cervical cancer burden, making adolescent HPV vaccination, organized screening, effective treatment pathways and culturally appropriate communication especially important. Achieving the WHO 90–70–90 targets by 2030 requires a coordinated, equity-oriented approach that treats vaccination not as a stand-alone intervention but as one component of a lifelong cervical cancer prevention pathway.

Keywords: Human papillomavirus; HPV vaccination; Cervical cancer; Cervical intraepithelial neoplasia; Screening; Women's health; Vaccine hesitancy; Cervical cancer elimination; Public health.

Introduction

Cervical cancer is a malignancy of the cervix with a distinctive feature that makes population-level prevention unusually achievable: its causal pathway is strongly linked to a persistent viral infection and includes a prolonged precancerous phase. WHO reports that almost all cervical cancers are linked to high-risk HPV infection; in 2022, approximately 660,000 women were diagnosed with cervical cancer and about 350,000 died. The burden is concentrated in low- and middle-income countries, where limitations in vaccination, screening and treatment magnify preventable mortality.

The supplied thesis frames cervical cancer as both a women's health problem and an equity problem, emphasizing that prevention depends on HPV vaccination, early detection, treatment of precancer and public awareness. It also describes the natural history of HPV infection, including transient infection, persistence, CIN progression and eventual invasion, and highlights the need to combine molecular screening with established cytological and visual methods [1].

The purpose of this review is to synthesize the thesis material with current international evidence and present a concise, publication-oriented overview of HPV biology, cervical carcinogenesis, vaccine platforms, efficacy and safety, vaccination schedules, screening, implementation barriers, the Indian context and strategies required to move from disease control toward elimination.

Global and Indian Burden of Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer remains the fourth most common cancer among women globally. The disease is distributed unequally: incidence and mortality are substantially higher where access to preventive services is limited. IARC estimates that roughly 90% of both incidence and mortality occur in low- and middle-income settings. This geographic pattern demonstrates that cervical cancer is not simply a biological problem; it is strongly influenced by health-system capacity, socioeconomic conditions, screening coverage, vaccine availability and timely access to treatment.

India continues to experience a major burden. GLOBOCAN 2022 estimated 127,526 new cervical cancer cases in India, making cervix uteri the second most common cancer among Indian women after breast cancer. The supplied thesis similarly identifies cervical cancer as a major cause of morbidity and mortality in Indian women and emphasizes that

persistent high-risk HPV infection is the key preventable cause [2].

The disease burden is particularly important because cervical cancer generally develops slowly. Most HPV infections are transient, but a minority persist and progress through precancerous stages. This long window creates multiple opportunities for intervention: vaccination before exposure, screening during the precancerous phase and treatment before invasion.

HPV Infection and Cervical Carcinogenesis

HPV infection and persistence

HPV is a highly prevalent sexually transmitted infection. Most infections are asymptomatic and are controlled by the host immune system within approximately 1–2 years. The clinically important event is persistence of a carcinogenic HPV type. The supplied thesis identifies HPV-16 and HPV-18 as the principal high-risk types and describes additional oncogenic types, including 31, 33, 45, 52 and 58.

Persistent infection is influenced by viral genotype and host factors. Important cofactors described in the thesis include immunosuppression or HIV infection, smoking, early sexual debut, multiple sexual partners, long-term oral contraceptive exposure, high parity, coinfections and limited access to healthcare. These factors should be understood as modifiers of progression rather than substitutes for the central causal role of persistent high-risk HPV [3].

Molecular basis of carcinogenesis

High-risk HPV produces the viral oncoproteins E6 and E7, which disrupt cellular tumor-suppressor pathways. E6 promotes functional inactivation and degradation of p53, thereby reducing apoptosis and weakening responses to DNA damage. E7 interacts with the retinoblastoma (pRB) pathway and promotes inappropriate cell-cycle progression. Persistent expression of these proteins contributes to genomic instability, altered proliferation and accumulation of cellular abnormalities [4].

The progression from infection to cancer is therefore multistep rather than immediate. Infection of the cervical transformation zone may be followed by persistence, development of CIN and, in a subset of women, invasion through the basement membrane. The supplied thesis describes CIN-1 as generally low-grade and frequently regressive, whereas CIN-2 and CIN-3 have greater potential for persistence and progression. Untreated high-grade lesions can eventually develop into invasive disease.

Histological spectrum

Squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma constitute the principal histological categories of invasive cervical cancer. Changes in the relative distribution of histological types reinforce the need for prevention strategies that do not depend exclusively on cytology. Molecular HPV testing provides an etiological approach that can identify women at risk before invasive cancer develops [5].

HPV Vaccines: Development, Platforms and Mechanism

The conceptual breakthrough in HPV vaccine development was the discovery that the L1 capsid protein can self-assemble into non-infectious virus-like particles (VLPs). These VLPs resemble the viral surface but contain no viral DNA and therefore cannot cause HPV infection. The supplied thesis describes this development and emphasizes the role of VLP-based vaccination in inducing strong neutralizing antibody responses.

Licensed prophylactic vaccines are bivalent, quadrivalent or nonavalent. Bivalent vaccines target HPV-16 and HPV-18. Quadrivalent vaccines additionally target HPV-6 and HPV-11, which are responsible for most anogenital warts. The nonavalent vaccine extends coverage to HPV-31, 33, 45, 52 and 58. Thus, vaccine choice can influence breadth of protection, although all licensed vaccines are designed primarily around prevention of oncogenic HPV infection [6].

Vaccination is prophylactic rather than therapeutic. It prevents new infection but does not eradicate established HPV infection or treat existing CIN. This distinction is essential for public communication: vaccination is most effective when administered before exposure, which is why early adolescence is the primary target population [7].

Immunological response

Following intramuscular administration, VLP antigens stimulate antigen-presenting cells and activate B-cell responses, producing high concentrations of neutralizing antibodies. Adolescents generally mount stronger antibody responses than older recipients. Immune memory supports durable protection, and WHO summarizes evidence showing long-lasting protection with no indication that protection rapidly wanes after the recommended schedules.

Evidence for Efficacy and Effectiveness

Randomized trials established high efficacy against persistent infection and high-grade cervical lesions caused by vaccine-targeted HPV types. Long-term observational studies have subsequently demonstrated effects on clinically important endpoints. In a nationwide Swedish study of 1,672,983 girls and women aged 10–30 years, invasive cervical cancer occurred in 19 vaccinated participants versus 538 unvaccinated participants. After adjustment for covariates, vaccination was associated with a substantially reduced incidence of invasive cervical cancer; the reduction was greatest among women vaccinated before age 17 [8].

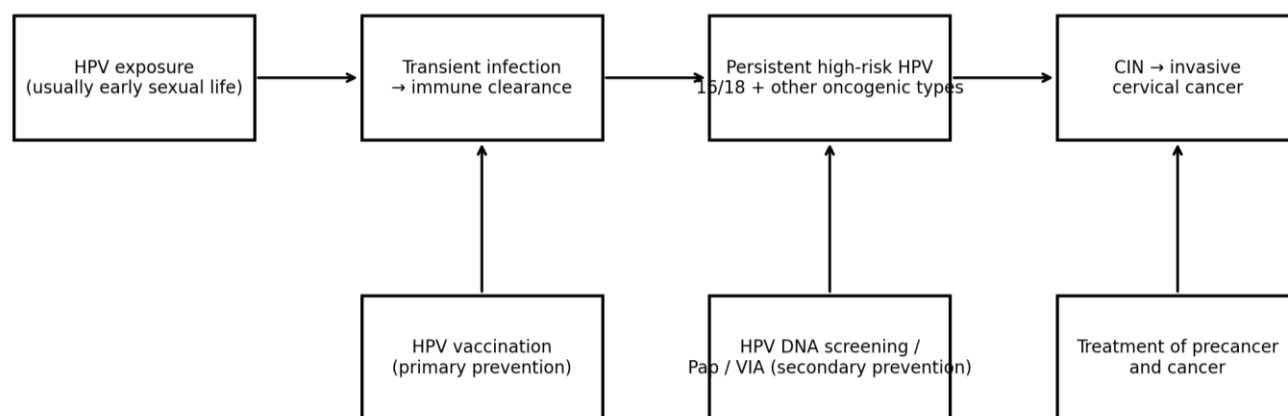
Population programmes have also demonstrated reductions in HPV prevalence and cervical precancer, together with evidence of indirect protection in some settings. The public-health value of vaccination therefore extends beyond direct individual protection: high coverage can reduce circulation of vaccine-targeted HPV types and contribute to population-level protection.

The magnitude of benefit depends strongly on age at vaccination, baseline HPV exposure, vaccine coverage, completion of recommended schedules and the epidemiology of HPV types in the population. Consequently, programme success cannot be assessed only by vaccine efficacy under trial conditions; coverage and equitable delivery are equally important [9].

HPV Vaccination Schedules and Safety

WHO's current position allows programmatic flexibility. For girls aged 9–14 years, a one- or two-dose schedule may be used; the same one- or two-dose approach is available for girls and women aged 15–20 years. For women older than 21 years, WHO recommends two doses six months apart. For people who are immunocompromised or living with HIV, at least two doses are recommended, and three doses should be used where feasible because evidence for single-dose protection is more limited [10].

HPV vaccines have a strong safety record. Common adverse effects are usually mild and transient, especially injection-site pain, redness or swelling, headache, fatigue and low-grade fever. Syncope can occur in adolescents after vaccination, so observation after injection is appropriate. Severe allergic reactions are rare. WHO states that HPV vaccines are safe and well tolerated, while ongoing pharmacovigilance continues to monitor safety.



Integrated prevention pathway: vaccination + screening + timely treatment

Figure 1: Integrated pathway linking HPV infection, carcinogenesis and the three major prevention opportunities. Vaccination prevents infection before exposure; screening detects persistent HPV or precancer; treatment interrupts progression to invasive disease.

HPV vaccination is generally deferred during pregnancy as a precaution; if pregnancy is recognized after a dose, remaining doses can be postponed until after pregnancy. Inadvertent administration has not been associated with evidence of harm. Breastfeeding is not a contraindication [11].

The safety message is particularly important because misinformation can undermine uptake. Current evidence does not support causal links between HPV vaccination and infertility or chronic neurological disease. Communication should acknowledge expected minor reactions while clearly explaining the much greater burden of preventable cervical cancer [12].

Table 1: Comparison of major prophylactic HPV vaccine platforms.

Platform	HPV types covered	Major benefit	additional	Public-health relevance
Bivalent	16, 18	Prevention of the principal oncogenic types		Strong cervical cancer prevention
Quadrivalent	6, 11, 16, 18	Also prevents most anogenital warts		Broad adolescent and young-adult utility
Nonavalent	6, 11, 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52, 58	Broader coverage	oncogenic	Potentially greater type-specific cervical cancer prevention

Cervical Screening After Vaccination

Vaccination does not remove the need for screening. Current vaccines do not cover every oncogenic HPV type, and some vaccinated individuals may have been infected before vaccination. Screening therefore provides a complementary secondary prevention layer. WHO recommends HPV DNA testing as the preferred primary screening approach in many programme settings because it is more sensitive and objective than cytology or visual inspection alone [13].

Cytology (Pap testing) remains important where it is established and appropriately quality-controlled. Visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) can be useful

in lower-resource settings because it permits immediate assessment and can support screen-and-treat pathways. HPV self-sampling is an important access innovation because it can improve acceptability and reach women who face barriers to facility-based screening.

Recent WHO guidance also emphasizes risk stratification and triage after a positive HPV test. Partial or extended genotyping, cytology, VIA, colposcopy and newer molecular triage tools can be used according to the resources and programme design of individual countries. The overall principle is that a positive test must connect to a functioning pathway for diagnostic evaluation and treatment [14].

Table 2: Complementary roles of vaccination and screening.

Component	Prevention level	Main target	Key limitation
HPV vaccination	Primary	Prevent new vaccine-type HPV infections	Does not treat existing infection and does not cover every oncogenic type
HPV DNA testing	Secondary	Detect persistent high-risk HPV	Requires laboratory/diagnostic infrastructure and follow-up
Pap cytology	Secondary	Detect cellular abnormalities	Requires trained personnel and quality assurance
VIA	Secondary	Identify visible precancerous lesions	Operator-dependent and less suitable when the transformation zone is not visible
Treatment of precancer	Secondary/tertiary bridge	Remove or ablate high-grade lesions	Requires timely referral and treatment capacity

WHO Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy

WHO defines cervical cancer elimination as reducing incidence to fewer than 4 new cases per 100,000 women per year. The Global Strategy rests on three linked targets for 2030: 90% of girls fully vaccinated with HPV vaccine by age 15; 70% of women screened with a high-performance test by age 35 and again by age 45; and 90% of women identified with cervical precancer or cancer receiving appropriate treatment.

These targets illustrate why vaccination alone cannot eliminate cervical cancer. A highly vaccinated population may still experience disease among unvaccinated women, people infected before vaccination, and women exposed to oncogenic types not covered by a particular vaccine. Conversely, screening without high vaccination coverage leaves a large pool of future infections. Elimination requires simultaneous improvement across the prevention cascade [15].

Modelling summarized by WHO indicates that sustained achievement of the 90–70–90 targets could avert tens of millions of cervical cancer cases and deaths over the coming century. The greatest gains are expected where current service coverage is low, making equity-focused implementation central to the elimination agenda.

Barriers to HPV Vaccination and Screening

Vaccine hesitancy and misinformation

The thesis identifies vaccine myths, safety concerns, limited knowledge, cultural beliefs, cost and parental hesitancy as major barriers. HPV vaccination can be particularly sensitive because it is associated with

sexual transmission, which may generate stigma or fears that vaccination promotes sexual activity. Evidence does not support that interpretation. The vaccine is a cancer-prevention intervention and is most effective when given before HPV exposure [16].

Access, affordability and health-system limitations

LMICs face additional barriers, including vaccine procurement costs, supply interruptions, cold-chain constraints, insufficient trained personnel, weak screening infrastructure and poor referral systems. Rural populations may experience multiple barriers simultaneously: geographic distance, transport costs, limited information, and fewer trained providers. These constraints can create a cycle in which low coverage leads to low perceived benefit, further weakening demand.

Social and gender inequities

Cervical cancer disproportionately affects women who have less access to preventive services. Education, income, rural residence, social marginalization and health literacy can influence both vaccination and screening. Elimination programmes should therefore measure coverage by geography and socioeconomic status rather than relying only on national averages [17].

Strategies to Improve HPV Vaccine Uptake

Effective programmes require more than vaccine availability. First, healthcare professionals should provide strong, routine recommendations and communicate using simple, culturally appropriate language. Second, school-based or adolescent-health

delivery can reach the primary target age group efficiently. Third, governments should minimize financial barriers and ensure reliable procurement, cold-chain capacity and last-mile delivery.

Community engagement is equally important. Teachers, community health workers, parents, local leaders and trusted healthcare professionals can help normalize vaccination. Social media should be used to address misinformation rapidly, but messages should be adapted to local languages and concerns rather than relying on generic statements [18].

Digital tools can strengthen programme performance through electronic immunization records, reminder systems, defaulter tracking and geographic monitoring. However, digital strategies should complement—not replace—outreach to populations with limited connectivity.

Pharmacists and other frontline healthcare professionals can contribute through education, vaccine counselling, referral for screening and reinforcement of preventive-health messages. Their role is particularly valuable where they are accessible to families and adolescents and can provide trusted, repeated contact [19].

The Indian Context and Public-Health Priorities

India's large population means that even modest improvements in adolescent vaccination coverage can produce major absolute reductions in future cervical cancer burden. The supplied thesis describes India's national HPV vaccination initiative, including a focus on adolescent girls and government-supported delivery. It also highlights indigenous vaccine development and the potential of affordable products to improve access.

For India, priority actions should include high coverage before HPV exposure, strong school and primary-care delivery systems, reliable vaccine supply, locally appropriate communication, and integration with cervical screening. Screening programmes should be designed around HPV testing where feasible, while retaining pragmatic options such as cytology or VIA according to local infrastructure.

A particularly important policy issue is continuity across the life course. A girl vaccinated in adolescence still needs an appropriate future screening pathway. Health systems should therefore connect immunization registries with adolescent health education and later reproductive-health services, while maintaining privacy and ethical safeguards [20].

Emerging Approaches and Future Directions

The prevention landscape is evolving beyond conventional Pap-based screening. HPV self-sampling is increasingly recognized as an approach to reduce barriers to screening. Molecular triage and genotyping can improve risk stratification among HPV-positive women. The 2026 WHO guidance on HPV DNA genotyping further emphasizes the potential of genotype-specific risk assessment to inform screening algorithms.

Future diagnostics may also incorporate more advanced molecular platforms, including nucleic-acid amplification, dual-stain cytology and other biomarker-based triage approaches. The thesis identifies emerging technologies such as next-generation sequencing, CRISPR-based detection and liquid-biopsy concepts as potential areas of development. These approaches remain at different stages of validation and implementation and should not be treated as replacements for established screening until adequate evidence and regulatory pathways are available.

Research should increasingly focus on implementation science: how to deliver proven interventions at scale, maintain high uptake, reach underserved populations, minimize missed doses, improve linkage to treatment and measure outcomes. Vaccine effectiveness is ultimately determined by real-world coverage and continuity of care.

Discussion

The evidence synthesized in this review supports a clear conclusion: HPV vaccination has transformed the prevention of cervical cancer, but its full potential is realized only when vaccination is integrated with screening and treatment. The biology of cervical carcinogenesis creates an unusually favorable prevention window. Vaccination can prevent the initiating infection, screening can detect persistent infection or precancer, and treatment can interrupt progression before invasion [21].

The strongest argument for early adolescent vaccination is not merely higher immunogenicity; it is prevention before HPV exposure. The Swedish population study provides an important real-world demonstration that vaccination at younger ages is associated with greater protection against invasive cervical cancer. WHO's simplified schedule provides an opportunity to improve coverage in settings where multi-dose completion has been a major operational barrier [22].

At the same time, simplification of the schedule should not distract from programme quality. A single dose is useful only if it reaches the target population. High coverage, accurate documentation, safety monitoring

and equitable access remain essential. In immunocompromised populations, the evidence base for reduced schedules is more limited and a minimum of two doses remains recommended [23].

The persistent burden in LMICs demonstrates that scientific progress alone is insufficient. Financing, supply chains, trained personnel, screening access and treatment capacity are determinants of whether prevention technologies translate into saved lives. Cervical cancer elimination should therefore be framed as an integrated health-system objective rather than a vaccine-only campaign [24,25].

Limitations of the Present Review

This is a focused narrative review rather than a formal systematic review or meta-analysis. The supplied thesis was used as the principal source framework and was supplemented with current WHO, IARC and selected peer-reviewed evidence. Numerical estimates may vary by year, cancer registry methodology and population definition; therefore, the most recent authoritative source should be preferred for programme planning. Vaccine schedules and national policies can also change over time and should be checked against current regulatory and public-health guidance before clinical implementation.

Conclusion

Cervical cancer is one of the clearest examples of a cancer that can be substantially prevented through coordinated public-health action. Persistent high-risk HPV infection is the central cause, and prophylactic HPV vaccination offers an effective means of preventing the initiating infection. The accumulated evidence supports strong effectiveness against HPV infection, precancer and, importantly, invasive cervical cancer, with the greatest benefit when vaccination occurs before exposure.

Nevertheless, vaccination should never be considered a substitute for screening. HPV DNA testing, cytology, VIA, self-sampling, appropriate triage and timely treatment form complementary components of secondary prevention. The WHO 90–70–90 framework provides a practical roadmap: vaccinate 90% of girls by 15, screen 70% of women at the specified ages and ensure 90% of women with cervical disease receive appropriate treatment.

For India and other high-burden settings, the central challenge is implementation at scale and with equity. Reducing misinformation, strengthening healthcare-provider recommendations, ensuring affordability and reliable supply, reaching rural and underserved populations, and linking vaccination to lifelong screening pathways are essential. With sustained

political commitment, adequate financing and evidence-based service delivery, cervical cancer can move from being a major cause of preventable death to a rare disease.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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