The Dilemma on HPV Vaccine

Why in news?

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- A new vaccine against HPV Virus has been proposed for introduction into the Universal Immunisation program (UIP).
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- But there is considerable opposition for such a move.
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What is the HPV?

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- ‘Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)’ causes penile cancer in men and cervical, vaginal, anal & vulvar cancer in women.
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- It can also cause throat or rectum cancer in both men and women.
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- The virus is transmitted through intimate contact like - sexual intercourse, oral or anal sex.
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- It poses a higher risk for HIV-infected persons, smokers, and people dependent on hormonal contraceptives.
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What is the current status of the Vaccination drive?

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- **The Vaccine -** In India, two vaccines namely “Gardasil” & “Cervarix” are available.
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- These vaccines protects against almost 90% of genital warts in men and women.

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- The HPV vaccine is given thrice within six months to girls aged 9-13 years, before they become sexually active.
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- Post-vaccination, a girl should ideally undergo pap smear tests every three years to check for pre-cancerous or cancerous cells.
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- **Government Policy -** Punjab and Delhi have already begun vaccination for girls.
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- National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (NTAGI) has proposed the inclusion of these vaccines in UIP for nationwide implementation.
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- However, the medical community in India is divided over the vaccine's utility.
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How prevalent is cervical cancer?

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- While globally, cervical cancer is the fourth most frequent cancer in women - among Indian women, it is the second most frequent.
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- The number of deaths from cervical cancer annually is 74,000 and India accounts for a third of these deaths.
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- Nearly 366 million Indian women aged 15 years and above are at risk from cervical cancer.
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- While there has indeed been a fall in the incidences lately, it is still high with 1.32 lakh new cases being diagnosed every year.
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- Particularly women from rural areas where sanitation and hygiene standards are low are at a greater risk.
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What are the views opposing HPV vaccination?

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- The cost of the vaccine (around 12k per person) and the budget to cover a huge population are the major challenge in India.
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- With 6.2 crores Indian girls aged 9-13 years, the cost to the government will be over Rs 56,000 crores.
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- Also there is no data to suggest that they comprehensively prevent invasive cervical cancer as evaluation requires long testing periods.
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- HPV vaccine has also been found to have side-effects such as regional pain syndrome and neurological problems in some cases.
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- Contrarily, India is already witnessing a declining trend in cervical cancer due to better nutrition, hygiene & reproductive patterns.
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- Hence, a case for improving these aspects further, rather than expose the entire population to the vaccination holds ground.
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What are the views supporting HPV vaccination?

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- 'WHO Global Advisory Committee for Vaccine Safety (GACVS)' had concluded that there the HPV vaccines are safe.
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- 71 countries had introduced HPV vaccine in their immunisation programme for girls and 11 countries included boys too.
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- Australia was the first country to introduce HPV vaccination in its school program and now has the lowest level of cervical cancer.
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- **Indian Case –** In India there is already enough manpower and cold storage for vaccines.
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- Hence, some argue that the prevention cost will be lower than treatment cost.
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- As, awareness on prevention of HPV infections and safe sex is low in India, there is a view that it can't be solely relied to fight HPV.
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Source: Indian Express

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