

HPV vaccination helping prevent preterm births

One of the most important factors of preterm birth is the length of the cervix measured by ultrasound in mid-pregnancy.

What does the HPV vaccination program have to do with cervical length?

Persistent HPV infection may cause precancerous changes to the cervix and it is the treatment of these changes that can affect the cervix and its subsequent function.

Precancerous changes to the cervix are generally treated by having part of the cervix removed by a loop excision procedure (LLETZ or LEEP) or by cone biopsy using a regular scalpel.

These procedures can reduce the length of the cervix.

Women who have a loop excision or cone biopsy are 1.7 to 2.6 times more likely to have a preterm birth and 1.8 to 2.5 times more likely to have a low birth weight baby.

The news, however, is not all bad.

First, your medical practitioner will be well aware of the potential changes to your cervix that may have resulted from such a treatment and the WA Preterm Birth Prevention Initiative has solid clinical guidelines as to how the risk of early birth may be reduced.

Second, the national HPV vaccination program for school-aged girls and boys that began in 2007 has already nearly halved the incidence of significant precancerous changes in young women.



This reduction is saving many young women from needing surgical treatment of the cervix.

The national HPV vaccination program for girls and boys was introduced to prevent cancer, in particular of the cervix.

It looks likely that a secondary, and very beneficial effect, may be to help specialists prevent preterm birth.

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Good quality infertility treatment and advice will prevent preterm births

It has been known for many years that a woman who undergoes fertility treatment is at a greater risk of complications in pregnancy, which may result in a preterm birth.



Professor Roger Hart

This may involve simply taking some tablets to assist with ovulation, or whether she embarks on IVF treatment.

It is not quite clear what is the cause of this increased risk; however, if she conceives a twin pregnancy or even triplets, the risks are increased even more.

Therefore it is essential that a couple that is having difficulty in conceiving is offered top quality care. Australian fertility clinics lead the world in minimising the number of twin pregnancies.

Despite this, there are still many women undergoing fertility treatment who will ultimately have a preterm birth.

The reason for this outcome is often entirely outside the woman's, and her treating doctor's, control.

For instance, women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome are at an increased risk of developing diabetes and high blood pressure in pregnancy and are at an increased risk of preterm delivery.

A way that this risk can be reduced is by excellent preconception care and top quality fertility treatment.

All women and their partners should try to get themselves as healthy as possible before they try to conceive.

This not only reduces the time to become pregnant, but also improves their chances of a successful pregnancy and delivering a healthy child.

Therefore couples should work towards getting their bodies into the healthy weight range, stop smoking and moderate or stop drinking, and taking their multivitamins.

The woman should perform some gentle exercise that she would be happy to continue into pregnancy and she should visit her general practitioner for a preconception check-up.

This visit is very important as it will enable the doctor to stabilise any medical conditions, and the medication the woman is taking; such as antidepressants, thyroid, diabetes and asthma medication and also ensure her PAP smears are up to date.

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