

HPV VACCINATION IN ROMANIA

GUIDE FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC,
HEALTHCARE AND AUTHORITIES

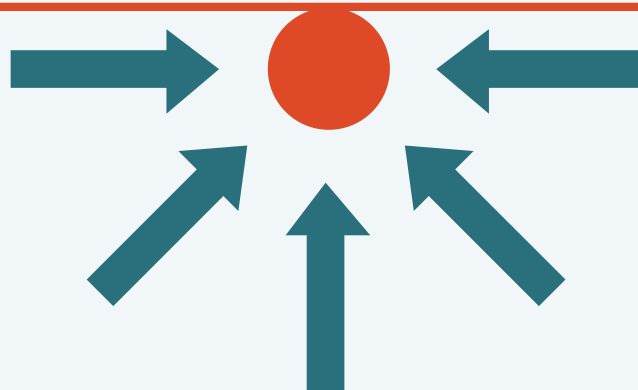


Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to provide key information about the HPV virus and the benefits of vaccination against it. It explores the risks associated with HPV infection, the importance of vaccination prevention, and the common myths surrounding them. The guide aims to provide accurate information and increase the level of information about vaccination against diseases caused by the HPV virus.

A deep understanding of this issue is crucial to individual and public health. That is why this material navigates through key information about HPV, how the vaccine works, who should get vaccinated, and what benefits it brings to protecting against this virus. The guide tackles common myths and doubts, and provides resources to support the decision-making.

This guide is a support for the correct information on vaccination against diseases caused by the HPV virus.



Content

Presentation of the ReThinkHPVaccination project (Rethinking and reducing inequalities in HPV vaccination through personalized communication and training, based on social innovations and behavioral determinants of health)

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ReThinkHPVaccination project



The project "Rethinking and reducing inequalities in vaccination against HPV virus diseases through personalized communication and training, based on social innovations and behavioral determinants of health (ReThinkHPVaccination) is funded by the European Union through the EU4Health Programme and implemented by the Rebirth Foundation for Women's Health (as coordinator), Centre for Innovation in Medicine and Eurocomunicare Association (as partners), together with the European School of Oncology (as associate partner).

The ReThinkHPVaccination project aims to contribute to reducing inequalities in HPV vaccination through personalized communication actions and training, based on social innovation and targeted interventions on behavioral determinants of health. The main objective of the project is to support EU countries and countries in Europe to reconsider and restart their HPV vaccination campaigns. In doing so, the project brings us a step closer to achieving the European Cancer Combat Plan and the goals of the Cancer Mission in terms of vaccination against HPV diseases and cancer prevention.



Although cancers due to HPV are among the easiest to prevent, the vaccination rate in Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe and accession countries are low or very low. HPV infection is responsible for 99.7% of cervical cancers, and two types of HPV (16 and 18) cause about 70% from cervical cancers and pre-cancerous cervical lesions. There is also evidence linking HPV infection to anal, vulvar, vaginal, penile and oropharyngeal cancers. The currently available HPV vaccine covers about 90% of the viral strains in circulation.



In this context, vaccination of the female and male population should be one of the priorities of public health policies. With all the efforts made, in practice the results are lacking in many countries - Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Albania and others are clear examples of how lack of access to the right information, disinformation, disinformation, unrealistic communication strategies and vaccine-related infodemia (including COVID-19 vaccination) can lead to thousands of avoidable deaths. These countries have the highest rate of preventable and treatable deaths in the European Region.



General objectives of the project:



To provide evidence-based knowledge for European countries with a low HPV vaccination rate about the best communication and engagement strategy to restart or improve vaccination campaigns, based on understanding behavioral determinants of health and social innovations.



Provide guidance on addressing infodemics related to vaccination in general and vaccination against HPV, fighting fake news and conspiracy theories.



Develop training programs for key stakeholders in the national HPV vaccination process (train of trainers) - from the internalization of the idea of being vaccinated to vaccination per se.



Implement training and knowledge in two disadvantaged regions in Romania (Pilot Projects) and measure the level of knowledge about HPV vaccination before and after implementation.



To disseminate information to national authorities and NGOs or civil entities in Romania and to representatives of other countries with a similar profile.



Collaborate with relevant European institutions (for example, the Joint Research Centre) and contribute to the objectives of the Cancer Knowledge Centre, one of the key initiatives of the European Cancer Combat Plan.



About HPV

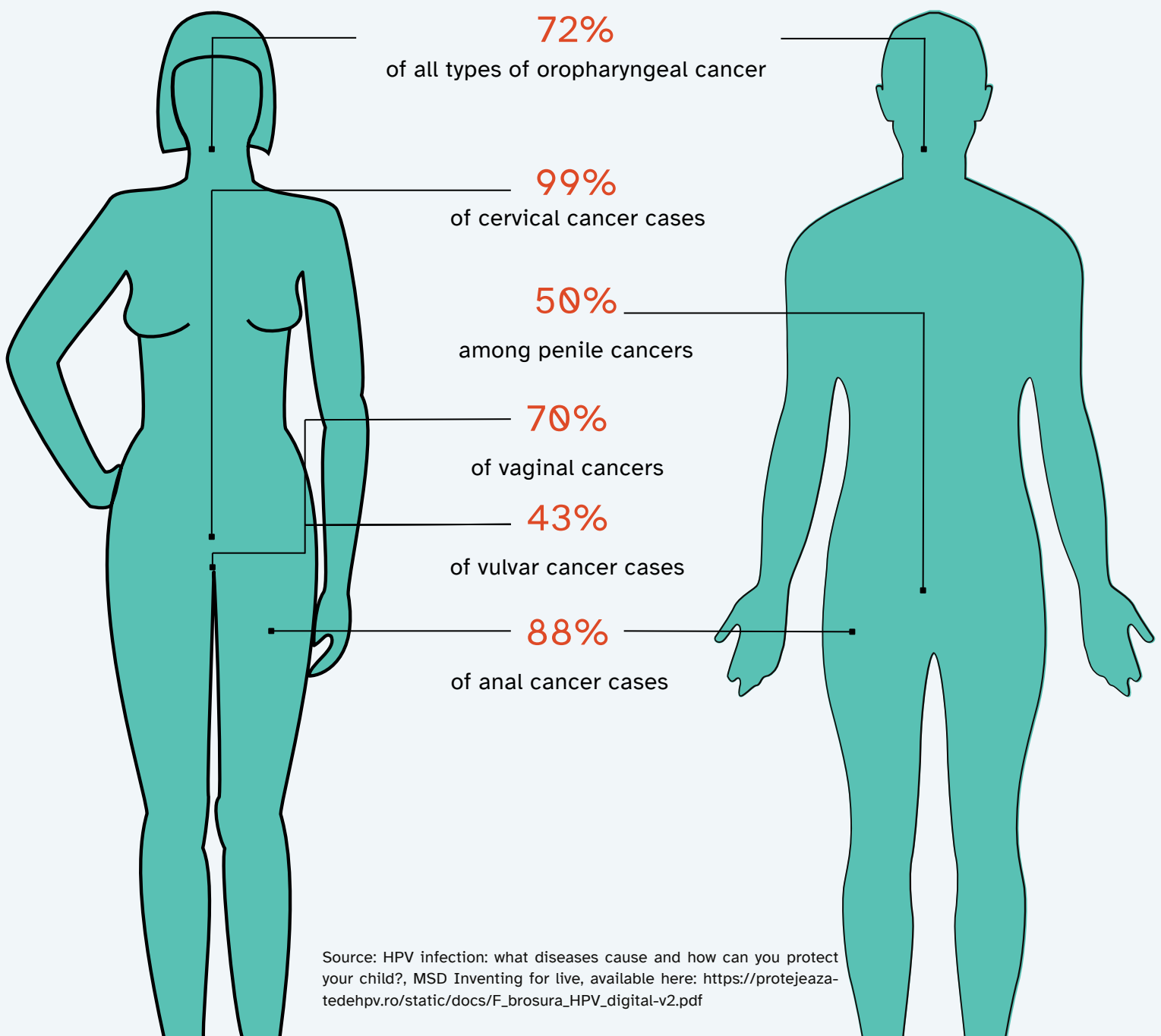
The Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) belongs to a family of viruses that affect the skin and mucous membranes. Currently, more than 200 types of HPV are known to affect the genitals, anal area and certain areas of the skin and throat, both in women and men. Of these, at least 14 have very high oncogenic potential, such as types 16 and 18 that are associated with 70% of cervical cancers and precancerous lesions. Others, such as types 31, 33, 45, 52, 58, 66, and 68, are at increased risk of causing cancer. In contrast, low-risk types, particularly 6 and 11, are responsible for 90% of genital warts.

Persistent infection with certain types of HPV causes abnormal growth cells (dysplasia) that may later become malignant. These changes lead to the appearance of precancerous lesions. Over time, untreated precancerous lesions may progress to cancerous lesions. In women, the main oncological risk associated with HPV infection is the development of cervical cancer. In men, cancers associated with HPV infection are anal cancer, penile cancer, and throat cancers.



HPV infection is the most common cause of cervical cancer, a slowly progressing condition that can affect women of any age. This oncological condition is the second leading cause of cancer among women under the age of 45. Cervical cancer is manifested by abnormal and uncontrolled multiplication of cells covering the cervix (cervix). This type of cancer can be identified by periodic testing with the Babes-Papanicolau test, which shows any change in the area of the cervix, and prevented by vaccination.

HPV infection is responsible for:



Source: HPV infection: what diseases cause and how can you protect your child?, MSD Inventing for live, available here: https://protejeaza-tedehpv.ro/static/docs/F_brosura_HPV_digital-v2.pdf

Chapter 1. Vaccination against HPV in Romania

1.1 Incidence of cervical cancer in Romania

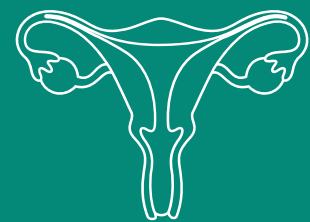
In Romania, cervical cancer is the third most common cancer among women, after breast and colorectal cancer. In the occurrence of cervical cancer four stages are described:



- Primary HPV infection
- Persistence of HPV infection (vs. removal of the virus)
- Evolution of persistent infection to precancerous lesions
- The appearance of invasive cancer



According to data from the National Plan for Combating Cancer published by the Ministry of Health in 2023, cervical cancer is the third oncological pathology, affecting women of all ages, after breast and colorectal. In Romania, over 3,300 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year, and over 1,700 die as a result of this disease.



1.2 Behaviors, attitudes and perception regarding HPV vaccination in Romania

Within the project, a questionnaire-based sociological research was carried out to:

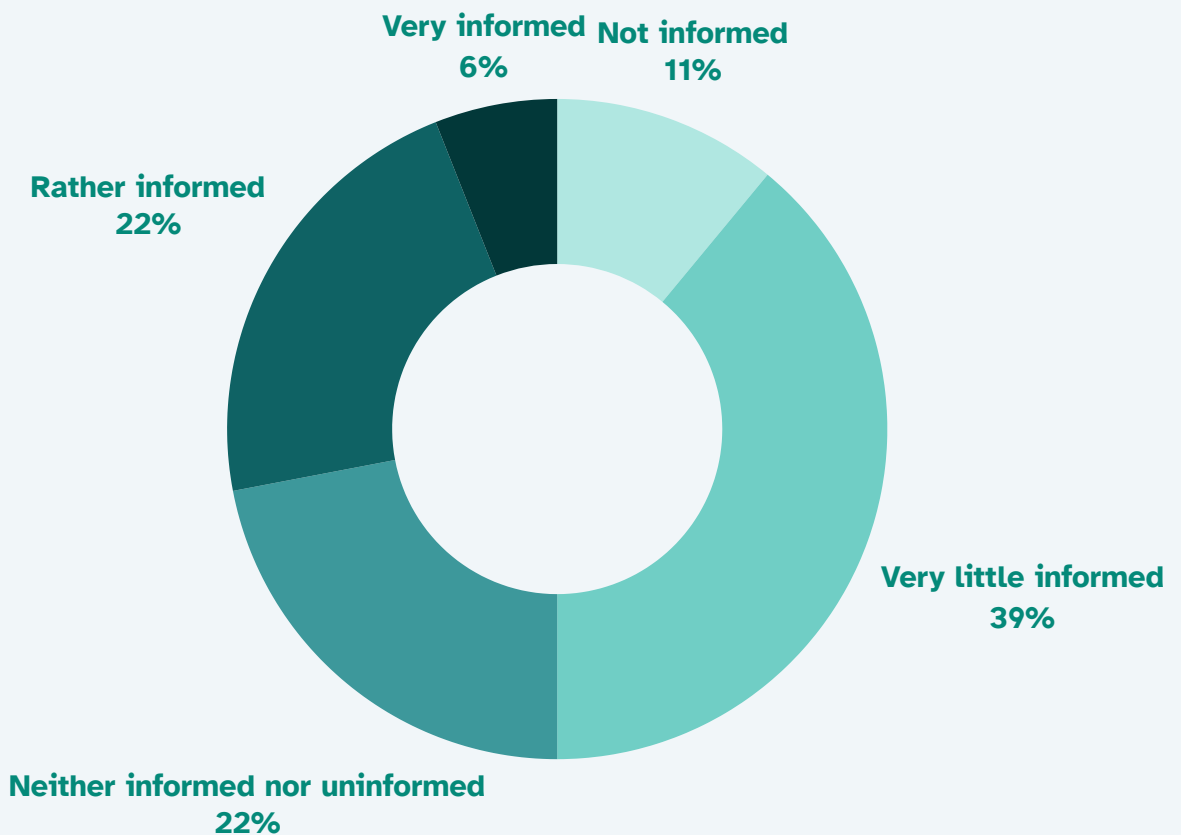
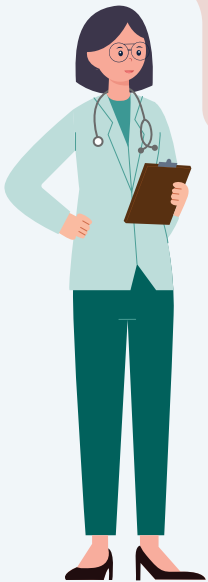
- 1** assess knowledge of HPV infection and HPV vaccination (self-reported data);
- 2** evaluate perceptions and opinions about the relationship between HPV infection and cancer;
- 3** identify how Romanians refer to the sources of information on medical subjects;
- 4** identify the patterns of the doctor-patient relationship in Romania.

The questionnaire addressed nine topics: information on HPV infection; level of HPV vaccination of participants; opinions on the safety of HPV vaccine; vaccination of children against HPV; link between HPV and cancer types; position towards medical information sources; key actors in decision-making towards vaccination; doctor relationship – patient; positioning towards COVID – 19.

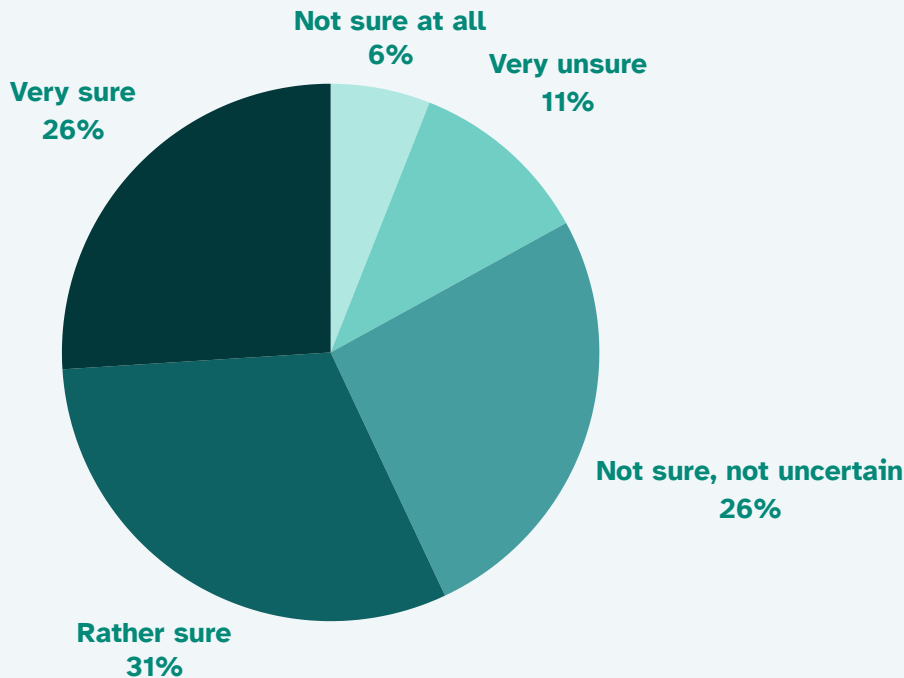
Data was collected online by using CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing). The sample is composed of 1110 persons, representative at national level for the adult population of Romania over 18 years (including). It is representative of socio-demographic categories (sex, age, occupation). The sample error margin is $\pm 3\%$ and has a 95% confidence level%. The study was conducted in November 2023.

Most respondents have very little or no information about HPV infection, while 28% consider themselves rather informed or highly informed about it. Analyzing the responses, 15% of those living in rural areas consider themselves not informed, compared to 9% of those living in urban areas. 26% of those living in urban areas consider themselves rather informed. Regarding the monthly net income, the percentage of those who consider themselves rather informed increases proportionally to the monthly income, from 17% without income, to 38% for those with a monthly income of over 10000 RON.

How informed do you think you are about HPV infection?



How safe do you think HPV vaccination is?



Vaccination against HPV is considered rather safe or very safe by 57% of respondents. Only 6% of those who have heard about HPV infection think that vaccination against this virus is not at all safe.



54% of participants argue that vaccination against HPV should become mandatory in large and very large measure. The 18-34 age category is the one that, by percentage, supports the most (56%) the introduction of mandatory HPV vaccination. Of the participants in this study, 56% of men largely and very largely believe that mandatory vaccination is necessary, compared to 52% of women.

An important correlation is between awareness and awareness of the need to introduce mandatory HPV vaccination. **Those who consider themselves rather informed largely or very largely believe that vaccination should be made mandatory.** The same correlation is observed in the opinion on the safety of HPV vaccination. **30% of those who said they are not informed at all consider that vaccination is not safe at all, while highly informed respondents believe 56% of the vaccine against HPV is very safe.**

Regarding the rate of vaccination against HPV, the majority of participants (93%) and their children (95%) are not vaccinated against this virus.

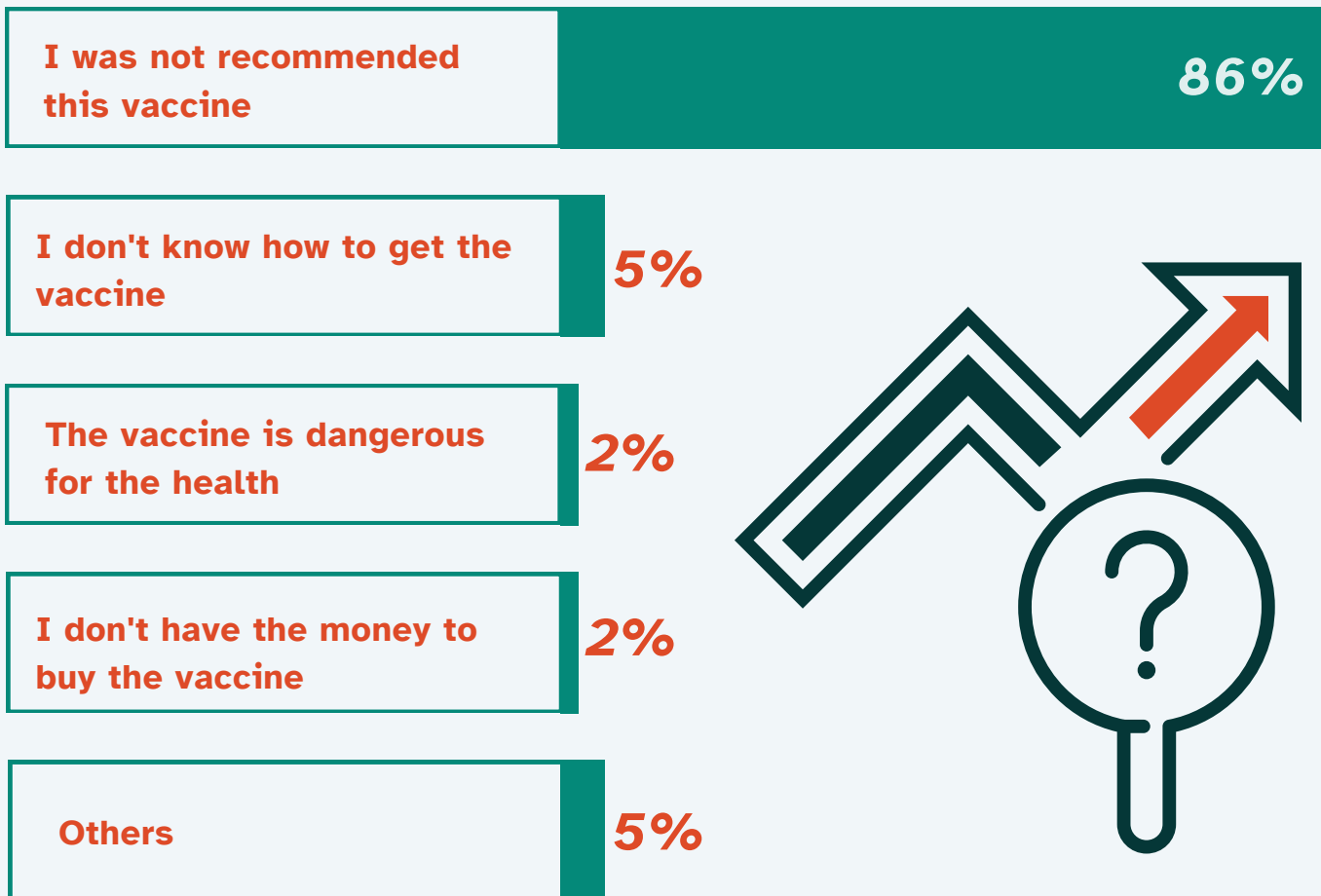


Those vaccinated against HPV are rather young women, aged 18-34, with higher education (university or post-graduate), living in urban areas.

Regarding income, most of the participants who claim to be vaccinated against HPV are those with a net income of over 10,000 RON, followed by the ones without income (the most likely explanation being that they are mostly involved in some form of education). The socio-demographic profile is similar in the case of respondents who have vaccinated their children: people from urban areas, with university education and income of over 10,000 lei. The predominant age category is 50-64 years.

With only 1% of respondents who consider themselves uninformed about HPV infection having vaccinated their children against the virus, the percentage of children getting vaccinated is growing to 15% for those who consider themselves informed, emphasizing the importance of information campaigns on this topic.

What is the main reason for not getting the vaccine against HPV? (for those who are not vaccinated)?



About 9 out of 10 respondents say they are not vaccinated against HPV because they were not recommended. Also, 5% of respondents do not know how to take possession of this vaccine, 2 out of 10 either do not have the money to purchase the vaccine, or consider it dangerous.



Most participants (68%) claim that HPV infection is dangerous and 50% of them somewhat agree or totally agree that they do not have enough information to understand the need for HPV vaccination.

Overall conclusions of the study on the perception of HPV vaccination:

Most participants (79%) heard about HPV infection. Of these, the most informed are young women 18-34 years old who live in urban areas.

Of the respondents, 67% did not receive recommendations for vaccination.

The majority (54%) believe that vaccination should be made compulsory to a large extent.

More than half of respondents (57%) consider HPV vaccination is safe or very safe.

Both respondents (93%) and their children (95%) are not vaccinated against HPV.

The main motivation for non-vaccination is the lack of recommendation (90%).

There is a strong association between HPV and cervical cancer in the perception of 7 out of 10 respondents.

Over half of the participants believe that HPV vaccination prevents cervical cancer.

Almost a quarter of participants had or know someone diagnosed with cancer.

Doctors are considered the most reliable source of medical information.

Research on HPV and vaccination is mainly based on the advice of doctors.

Almost a third of the participants discuss health issues with their family doctor and a quarter with their family.

The choice of vaccine is largely based on the recommendations of the family doctor.

Most parents (9 out of 10) vaccinate their children according to the mandatory schedule.

For the flu vaccine, just under half (49%) vaccinate their children.

Over half of the participants (60%) were vaccinated against COVID-19, and 38% did so on the recommendation of the family doctor.

OPINIONS OF PARTICIPANTS WHO HAVE AT LEAST ONE MINOR IN THEIR CARE RELATED TO VACCINATION AGAINST HPV

56%

Although 56% of participants who have at least one minor in their care believe that HPV vaccination is safe, only 1 in 10 parents with underage children in care have vaccinated their children against HPV.



92%

92% of parents with at least one minor child in care, had the child vaccinated according to the national program.

46%

46% of parents who have at least one minor child have vaccinated their child with the flu vaccine.



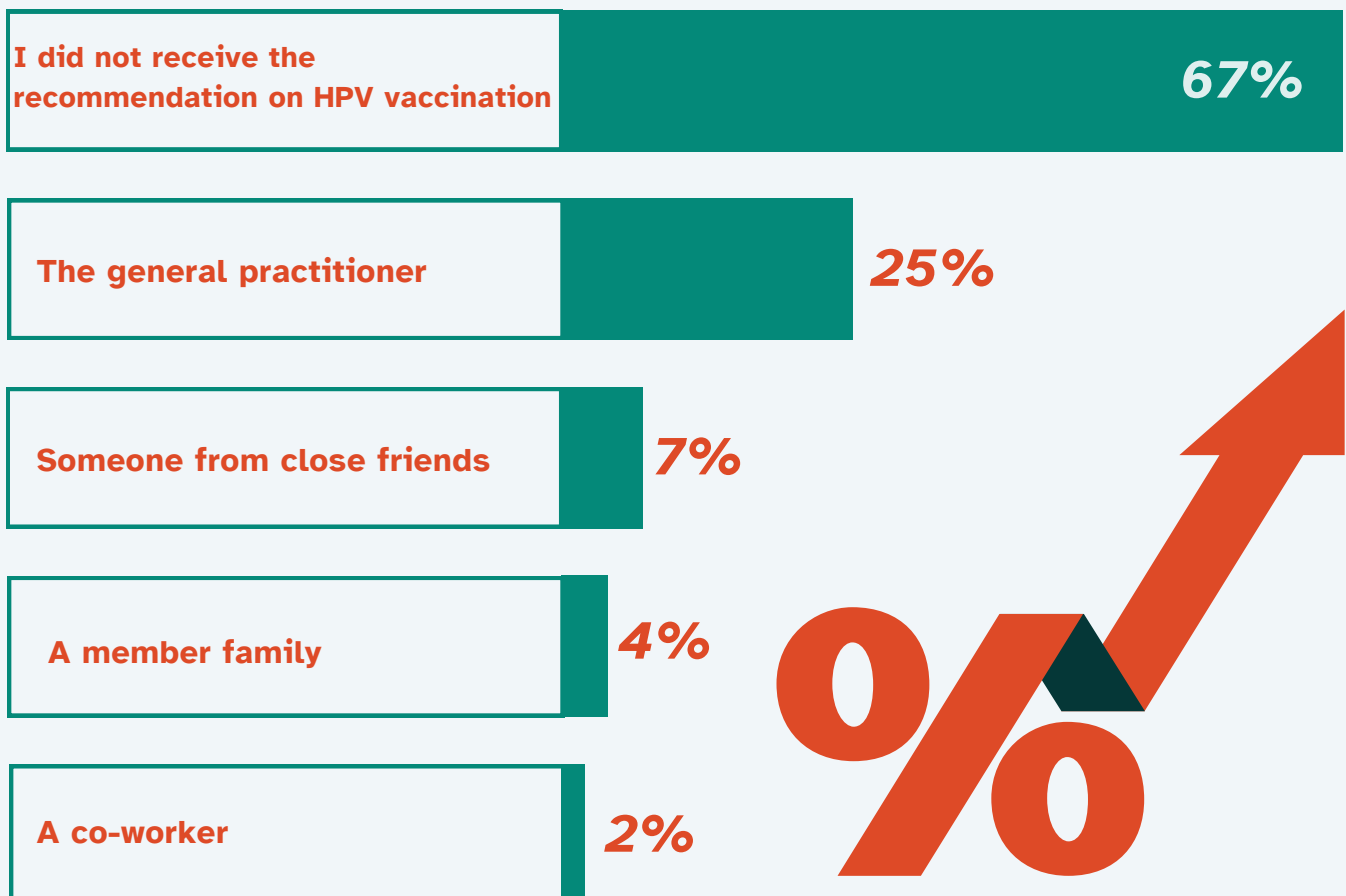
Chapter 2. Myths and misinformation about HPV vaccination

2.1 Myths and misinformation about HPV vaccination - key information for experts and healthcare

The importance of HPV vaccine recommendation

The study carried out in this project highlights the fact that in Romania, HPV vaccination is recommended only in very small proportions. Regarding the HPV vaccine, 67% of respondents did not receive recommendations for vaccination, and 25% received recommendations from their family doctor. According to the study, 4% of respondents received a recommendation for vaccination from a family member and 2% from a co-worker.

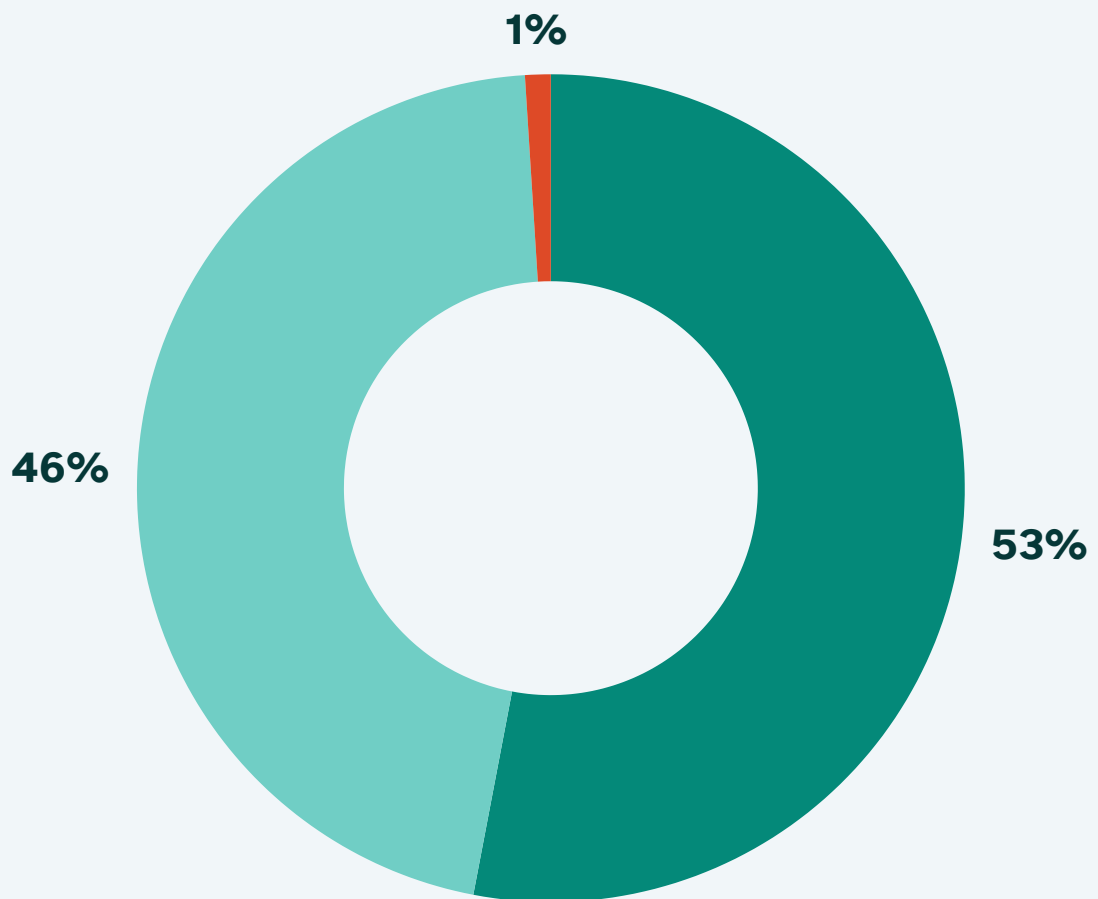
Has anyone ever recommended HPV vaccination?



An important aspect highlighted by our study is related to whom do the participants believe the vaccine targets. In this regard, **53% of respondents believe that the vaccine is addressed mainly to girls**, and 46% of them think it is addressed to both sexes. Only 1% of those surveyed believe that this vaccine is targeted specifically at boys.

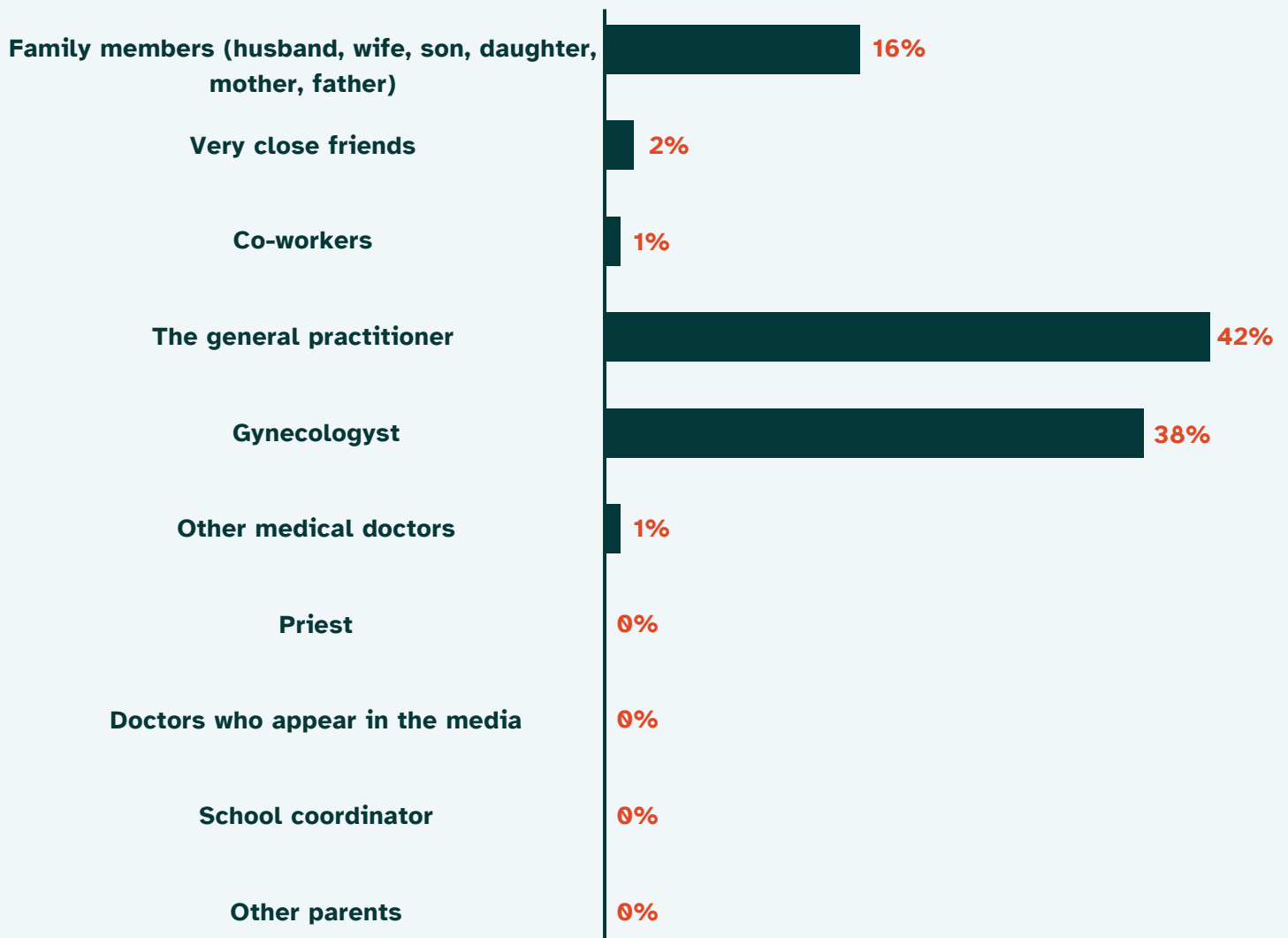


As far as you know, whom the HPV vaccination targets?



-  Only boys
-  Only girls
-  Equally, both boys and girls

To whom do you address to to get the first opinion on HPV vaccination?



Doctors have a key role to play in providing information about HPV vaccination. Regarding reliable sources of health information, doctors are at the top of participants' choice, followed by their family members and specialized websites. The same top holds true when it comes to opinions about vaccination.



Vaccination against HPV in Romania - a sensitive topic

In Romania, HPV vaccination is a very sensitive topic because it involves the prevention of a potential sexually transmitted disease from an early age. The lack of sustained campaigns and infrastructure for sexual education are important obstacles in promoting vaccination in Romania. In addition, parents and legal representatives do not know that vaccination of girls between 11 and 18 years of age is free of charge and that they can request this. Another important aspect is related to the fact that HPV infection does not show symptoms, the patient does not have discomfort that requires visiting the doctor.



Misleading myths and narratives about HPV vaccination in Romania



Among the public who oppose vaccination and who promote natural remedies in the fight against vaccine-preventable diseases, as well as in strongly traditional environments, a number of myths and misleading narratives related to HPV vaccination can be identified.

Misleading myths and narratives

Facts

"Vaccination against HPV encourages the start of sexual life among minors"

Informing the population and raising awareness about sex life does not lead to the early onset of sexual relations, on the contrary.

The HPV vaccine, like any other vaccine, does not involve the onset of sexual life, but only protects for infection with the most important strains of HPV.

"Provoke infertility"

The vaccine protects against some strains that cause cancer of the cervix, penile, vulvar, oropharyngeal. There is no link between HPV vaccination and infertility, on the contrary, the vaccine protects fertility.

"Vaccine against HPV has no effects in preventing cervical cancer"

In the UK and the US, HPV vaccination has reduced the incidence of cervical cancer by more than 90% following vaccination campaigns. The Lancet study published in 2021 (Falcaro et al.,) shows that the vaccine reduces the rate of disease in vaccinated girls by more than 85% at the age of 12-13 years.

"7 girls tested for HPV vaccine died in 2009"

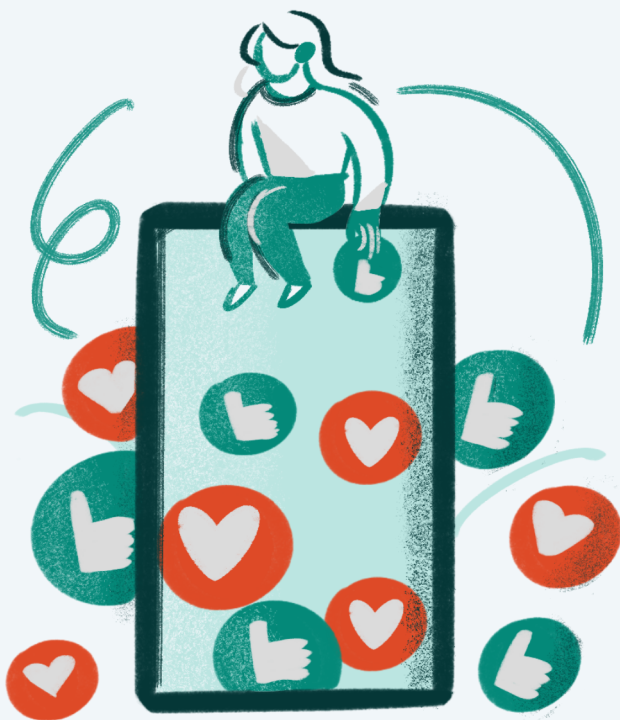
In a report published by the WHO's Global Advisory Committee on Vaccine Safety (GACVS) on 12 June 2013, this information is proved to be false and has been wrongly published by the Indian Parliament, based on misinformation. In the report, WHO says that the safety of the HPV vaccine has been reassessed and that there is no link between HPV vaccination and the 7 deaths in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat.

"HPV is a venereal disease"

The virus is not only taken through sexual contact, but can be transmitted through simple contact with the skin and does not depend on the number of partners or the dynamics of sexual life.

Communication on HPV vaccination

Studies and WHO reports argue that it is essential to open up dialogue between doctors and parents on HPV vaccination. Vaccination advice from doctors and health experts is essential in raising parental awareness and confidence in vaccination to protect their children against HPV-caused cancers.



Using social media is recommended to reach young audiences and spread messages about the benefits of vaccination.

Also, the use of key opinion leaders is an important element to increase trust and determine pro-vaccine behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON COMMUNICATION OF HPV VACCINATION IN ROMANIA

✔ Tailored awareness campaigns to gain internalization about the benefits of HPV vaccination

Although participants have some information about HPV vaccination, there is evidence that efforts are needed to raise awareness about the benefits and the optimal vaccination period.

✔ Age-related messages

To increase the effectiveness of immunisation, it is very important that the vaccine is given to children between 10 and 15 years of age. For this reason, it is essential to communicate with the parents of children in this age group. Equally important is to open dialogue with parents whose children have not yet reached this age.

✔ Communication campaigns to tackle vaccine hesitancy

Both the project study and international analyses and reports underscore the key role doctors play in reducing reluctance to HPV vaccination. Medical advice and dialogue-based relationship with parents alongside transparent and empathic communication are very important to increase trust and reduce hesitation towards vaccination.

✔ Reinforcing vaccine safety perceptions

Like any medical act, vaccination should be safe. Healthcare professionals and authorities must ensure that vaccination is carried out under optimal conditions and that patients and caregivers understand that the vaccine is safe and protects against HPV-related cancers.





✓ **Doctor-patient relationship**

Valuing and developing the doctor-patient relationship is one of the most important steps in increasing the confidence in vaccination and its protection. It is essential that the information provided is transparent, clear and the relationship with the patient is reliable.

✓ **Family support and influence**

Family involvement in discussions about HPV and the role of vaccination is very important. Experts and central and local authorities should initiate dialogue with families with children from the age groups concerned and encourage discussion within the family.

✓ **Use of infrastructure and previous vaccination-related experiences**

Both authorities and doctors need to give importance to how HPV vaccination can be achieved. The use of infrastructure and practices in the national childhood vaccination programme can be a real help in increasing HPV vaccination.

✓ **Using multiple media and communication channels**

It is important to use several media and communication channels, from traditional media to social media, community events and activations in large scale events and actions.

✓ **Constant feedback and adaptation**

Listening to opinions, fears, and questions of parents and patients are a real help in making communication more effective and adapting messages to address their concerns and concerns about HPV vaccination.

2.2 Key information for the general public on HPV vaccination

The vaccine protects against dangerous infections that can lead to serious health problems. There is strong evidence on the safety and efficacy of the HPV vaccine.

! **Protect your child! Those aged 11 to 19 can get the vaccine for free!**

In Romania, the vaccine is available and can be administered without prior preparation. Children can be vaccinated free of charge through their family doctor. Studies show that administering the vaccine to this age group is most effective to prevent disease.

! **Are you between 19 and 45 years old? The vaccine is 50% compensated**

For people aged 19 to 45, the vaccine is compensated for 50% by a family doctor.

! **Disinformation is as dangerous as disease**

Be properly informed about the HPV virus and protect yourself against disinformation! There are many myths and misleading narratives circulating in the public space regarding the vaccination of people against HPV. Get informed from reliable sources choose to protect yourself against HPV.

! **HPV can cause several types of cancer**

The HPV vaccine is the key to protecting against serious diseases. Certain types of HPV cause virtually all cervical cancers and can cause a number of other cancers, including anal, vulvar, vaginal, penile, and oropharyngeal cancers. The vaccine is a simple and effective measure to prevent these problems. Protect your health with vaccination and don't take unnecessary risks!

! **Infection can occur even in the absence of genital warts**

The most important way to protect yourself against HPV infection is by getting the vaccine. Condoms do not guarantee safety and can not completely prevent infections. One significant aspect is that the HPV virus can infect a person even when the partner does not show visible signs of genital warts or other lesions. This underlines the importance of additional preventive measures such as vaccination and regular medical examinations.



Falcaro, M., Castañon, A., Ndlela, B., Checchi, M., Soldan, K., Lopez-Bernal, J., ... & Sasieni, P. (2021). The effects of the national HPV vaccination programme in England, UK, on cervical cancer and grade 3 cervical intraepithelial neoplasia incidence: a register-based observational study. *The Lancet*, 398(10316), 2084-2092.

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