

# HPV Screening in Canada

## Where Are We Now?



Authored by **Dr. Vivien Brown** MDCM, CCFP, FCFP, MSCP and **Dr. Christine Palmay**, HBArtSci, MD, CCFP, FCFP



### Statement of Support:

“The CMA supports public awareness campaigns to help patients understand the benefits of HPV vaccines. The CMA recognizes vaccination as a key aspect of overall health care.”

HPV screening is making strides around the world, and we in Canada are working hard to implement HPV screening as an option for cervical cancer screening for Canadians with a cervix. In this newsletter, we are pleased to share with you a few highlights on progress towards implementing HPV screening programs in Canada.

In 2024, all provinces and most territories are planning or have begun to introduce HPV testing as primary screening for cervical cancer.<sup>1</sup> The HPV test detects cervical pre-cancer earlier and better than the Pap test, and can reduce the number of people who get the disease.<sup>1</sup> The HPV test aims to detect the presence of human papillomavirus (HPV) before the appearance of abnormal cells or pre-cancerous lesions. In comparison, the Pap test aims to detect abnormal cells and pre-cancerous lesions on the uterine cervix.

The HPV test can be done in a clinic with administration from a healthcare provider or done by eligible patients at home through HPV self-sampling kits. *After the experience with COVID-19 self-sampling and the acceptability of that practice, there is increased credibility to self-sampling in other areas.* With HPV testing, research shows that self-collected vaginal samples have similar accuracy to clinician-collected cervical specimens.<sup>2,3</sup>

The implementation of HPV testing for eligible patients in place of the Pap test as the primary cervical screening method takes time and comes with many considerations. In Canada, we are making progress but work still needs to be done. Currently, twelve of the thirteen provinces and territories in Canada are taking steps towards implementation of HPV primary screening, seven of which are planning for self-screening.<sup>4</sup> Here are a few highlights from provinces leading the way.

## 1 British Columbia

The *British Columbia Cervical Cancer Screening Program* has expanded its HPV self-screening program to include all eligible patients with a cervix aged 25-69. Since its launch in January 2024, BC Cancer has sent out more than 30,000 cervix self-screening kits and more than 1,000 clinics ordered vaginal swabs for cervix self-screening, with both figures exceeding initial expectations.<sup>5</sup> BC offers HPV testing at home through self-sampling, HPV testing in a healthcare provider's office, or the option for a Pap test for eligible patients by contacting their healthcare provider. *Eligible patients can order a cervix self-screening kit online through the BC Cancer Cervix Screening website.*<sup>6</sup> Healthcare providers in BC can order self-screening supplies on the *Cervix Screening Supplies online system.*<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Prince Edward Island

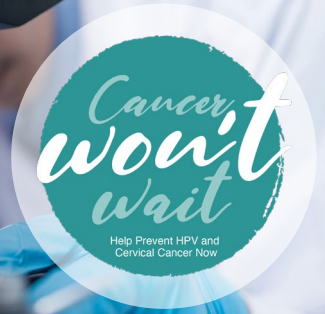
In May 2023, PEI became the first province to move from Pap tests to HPV testing as the primary screening for cervical cancer. By April 2024, approximately 2,600 tests had been completed.<sup>4</sup> Provincial Laboratory Services replaced the conventional Pap smear with primary HPV testing using PCR.<sup>8</sup> *On PEI, screening for HPV at least once every five years is recommended for eligible patients with a cervix, 25 to 65 years of age.* Patients can request an appointment with their healthcare provider or at a Cervical Cancer Screening Clinic.<sup>9</sup> *Currently patients have two options to choose from when requesting an appointment at a cervical screening clinic;* a cervical exam with a registered nurse who will collect a small sample of cells from the cervix, or patients can swab themselves with the HPV self-sampling kit in private at the clinic. In June 2024, Health PEI introduced a self-test HPV kit by starting with a pilot project to test all processes and pathways. The mini-pilot is being conducted at provincial cervical screening clinics, gender-affirming clinics, and three primary care providers, each from a different network. The goal is to have the new HPV self-test kit widely available to primary care offices in the next months.<sup>8</sup>

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### 3 Québec

In Québec's Cervical Cancer Screening Program, the HPV test will gradually replace the Pap test as the primary screening test for cervical cancer. *As of November 2024, the HPV test performed by a healthcare provider in certain regions of Québec is available as the primary screening test* for those eligible and is covered by the Québec Public Health Insurance Plan.<sup>10</sup> The move to the HPV test will take place gradually between 2023 and 2025. The Pap test may continue to be used as a complementary test (co-test) in some situations. The type of screening test offered in Québec varies according to region and is offered to those from the age of 25 years until 65 years. *Currently self-sampling for an HPV test is not available in Québec in the provincial cervical screening program.*<sup>10</sup>

### 4 Ontario

Ontario is making significant system-level changes to the *Ontario Cervical Screening Program* to support the launch of HPV primary screening, starting in 2025 as part of a province-wide, organized screening program. As of January 2024, Ontario has procured the HPV test system vendor and laboratory partners and has approved evidence-based recommendations for cervical screening and colposcopy with HPV primary screening and co-testing at their core, based on published literature and the Ontario context.<sup>1</sup> As of November 2024, self-collected HPV testing is available in Ontario for people to purchase, *however, it is not currently insured by the Ontario Health Insurance Program (OHIP) or recommended by the Ontario Cervical Screening Program<sup>11</sup> at this time.*

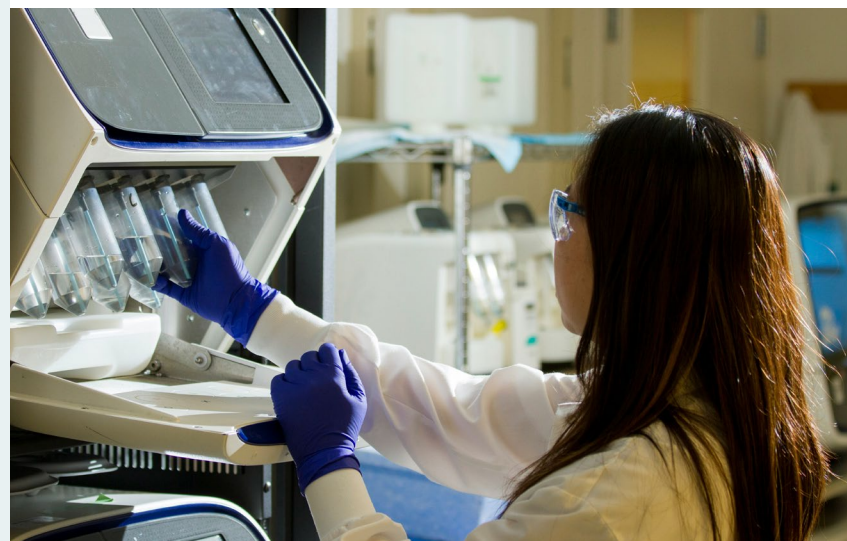
### 5 Alberta

In the fall of 2024, the Alberta Cervical Cancer Screening Program, with funding from Alberta Health, has launched an *HPV self-sampling pilot project.*<sup>12</sup> Eligibility criteria include those who identify as Indigenous, or newcomer, or live in a rural/remote part of Alberta, and are 25 to 69 years of age, have a cervix and have been sexually active at some point. A

total of 5,000 HPV self-sampling kits will be collected over the duration of the project, of which the first 300 kits are currently available in Edmonton.<sup>13</sup> The project will expand to community partners and rural areas so the screening can happen at home, or wherever the person feels most comfortable, before being sent off to a lab.

### 6 Northwest Territories, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador:

With the support of the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, these provinces are advancing planning and implementation of HPV primary screening.<sup>4</sup> According to CPAC, in Manitoba, HPV self-screening is being offered as a key strategy to support screening participation, especially among equity-denied groups. The Northwest Territories will be piloting an organized cervical screening program using HPV self-screening as the primary test.<sup>14</sup> This will be the first organized cervical screening program to roll out in the Territories. The creation of a culturally safe, organized cervical screening program will support territorial access to screening, build relationships and improve health outcomes across the Northwest Territories, with HPV primary screening at the forefront.<sup>14</sup>



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### Conclusion

Canada continues to progress towards implementing HPV primary screening as a critical step on our path to eliminating cervical cancer in Canada by 2040. As healthcare providers, it is essential that we stay informed about the latest developments and best practices in this field, and work to reduce health inequities. We encourage you to share your experiences and insights with us. We look forward to continuing to provide you with updates and resources to help protect against HPV-related cancers and diseases.

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### Clinic of the Month

**Dr. Renée Hall, MD FCFP, Medical Co-Director Willow Reproductive Health Centre, Vancouver, BC, Clinical Associate Professor, University of British Columbia**

At Willow Reproductive Health Center, we are committed to providing compassionate and respectful reproductive care that empowers patients to make informed choices aligned with their values. Recognizing the critical importance of educating our patients about HPV prevention, we have implemented several key initiatives aimed at enhancing vaccination uptake and reducing the risk of HPV-related cancers within our community.

During the intake process for new patients, we systematically document HPV immunization status and have integrated relevant questions directly into our EMR system. These HPV-specific questions are included in templates for various visit types, such as contraception, medical abortion, cervical screening, and STIs. This approach encourages our providers to engage in essential discussions about vaccination with all patients, thereby increasing awareness of HPV-related cancers for the patients, their children, and their partners. We have also increased visibility of educational materials, such as HPV prevention posters and pamphlets in our office. In addition, we've collaborated with local pharmacy chains to create comprehensive educational programs for their teams. This initiative ensures that all pharmacy staff are fully equipped and confident to discuss HPV-related information and administer vaccinations. By providing a direct pathway for patients to receive their injections at the pharmacy after consultations with us, we are making the vaccination process more accessible and convenient. All these efforts have been instrumental in boosting our HPV vaccination rates, contributing to a healthier and better informed community.

With the introduction of cervix self-screening in British Columbia in 2024--which allows patients to test for HPV at home or in-office--we identified a valuable opportunity to expand our educational HPV initiatives for other healthcare providers too. Our team regularly conducts lectures and workshops on contraception, abortion, and STIs, effectively incorporating HPV prevention into these discussions. Additionally, we frequently lead focused sessions specifically on HPV prevention for pharmacists, physicians, and nurse practitioners.

By facilitating meaningful, structured conversations with patients, and prioritizing ongoing education for our colleagues, Willow Reproductive Health Centre proudly supports Canada's cervical cancer elimination action plan. We are committed to advancing HPV-related health outcomes and promoting preventive care across our healthcare system.



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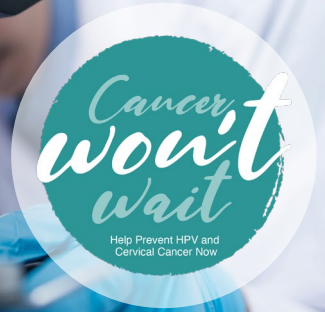


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### Hot off the Press

[HPV Primary Screening and Follow Up Pathway](#) - from the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer (CPAC) developed in collaboration with the pan-Canadian Cervical Screening Network (PCCSN)



### Back In Time

During the late 1700s, half of the 10,000 Continental Army soldiers in Quebec, came down with smallpox. The unit retreated, leaving the territory in British hands (and thus partially leading to Canada's status as a separate country today. - <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/653561/vaccines-facts-history>



### Did you Know?

In the first two months of the BC Cancer Cervix Screening Program, 30,000 self-screening kits were sent to people and approximately 30% of these self-screening kit requests were from people who had never been screened.

[Implementing HPV-Based Cervical Cancer Screening in BC update April 2024](#)



### Resource of the Month

CancerCare Manitoba: [Cervical Cancer Screening Kit Result](#)



### Around the Globe

Cancer Research UK: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are using HPV primary screening.

[About cervical screening](#)



### Join the Movement

[Join the Cancer Won't Wait newsletter and webinar series](#)

“Patience is a key element of any success.”

Bill Gates

