

# Reintroducing HPV reminders in schools can significantly improve vaccination rates among Slovenian adolescents

**Despite being free for adolescents and young adults up to age 26, many in Slovenia are missing out on the HPV vaccine. While schools provide information and access in 6th grade (to 11-12 years old pupils), follow-up stops soon after, leaving parents unaware that their children are still eligible. With no routine check-ups or reminders, many teens miss the window to complete the vaccination on time, risking incomplete protection against HPV.**

The situation becomes even more pressing by the 9th grade (when pupils are 14-15 years old). Uptake of the second dose remains particularly low, and without routine health check-ups or reminders, teenagers often miss the chance to complete the vaccination before age 15, the cutoff for requiring only two doses for full protection. Schools continue to play a central role in delivering information and facilitating access, but the drop-off in follow-up communication highlights a critical gap in ensuring adolescents are fully immunised.

This pilot initiative, funded by the European Union through the 'Overcoming Obstacles to Vaccination' project, reintroduced HPV information in the 9th grade through a simple reminder package: a printed letter and an illustrated booklet by a popular Slovenian author. Materials were handed out at the first parent-teacher meeting of the school year and also uploaded to the school-parent online platform (eAssistant). Parents were reminded that vaccination could be done by the school or their family paediatrician. The pilot initially planned to target only unvaccinated children, but due to privacy concerns, the reminder was sent to all parents of 9th-grade pupils instead.

Key partners included the National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ), regional NIJZ units, school paediatricians, and the Ministry of Education. The Local Implementation Working Group, comprising paediatricians, epidemiologists, communication experts, and parent representatives, collaborated to design materials, coordinate with schools, and monitor progress.

## *A school-mediated reminder strategy can effectively boost HPV vaccination coverage*

In the pilot regions, HPV coverage for the 2010 birth cohort rose by 5.6%, compared with 2.4% in control regions. The pilot mainly addressed the challenge of missed second doses, while monitoring focused on first-dose coverage as a practical, short-term indicator of vaccination activity. According to local health professionals, many of the vaccinations recorded during the pilot were actually second doses, completing the series started earlier in 6th grade.

Survey results showed that 35.7% of parents who received the reminder subsequently vaccinated their child. In contrast, among the children who remained unvaccinated, 72% had parents who

reported not receiving a reminder. This indicates that broader and more consistent dissemination of reminders could improve coverage. Parents also valued the initiative, reporting that it clarified the benefits of HPV vaccination, encouraged timely action, and reassured them about vaccine safety.

The pilot showed that a school-mediated reminder strategy is feasible, low-cost, and well accepted. It strengthened collaboration between health and education sectors, produced reusable multilingual materials, and offered parents a second chance to make an informed decision. By building on existing infrastructure, the model could be scaled nationally at low cost and adapted in other countries where schools and paediatricians are trusted sources of information.

### *Overcoming Obstacles to Vaccination across the EU*

“Overcoming Obstacles to Vaccination” is a three-year EU-funded project that aims to boost vaccination coverage by tackling physical, practical, and administrative barriers to seven key vaccines, including COVID-19, HPV (Human Papillomavirus), and MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella). The project identified effective practices across EU Member States, piloted them in countries facing similar challenges, and developed tailored recommendations for policymakers, health authorities, professionals, and citizens.