

Talk to your daughters about “breakthrough” HPV vaccine

By Marlene Freeman, M.D.

Have you seen the TV ads about an infection in women that can lead to cancer? It's important to know the facts about the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and its link to cervical cancer.

A Preventable Disease

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted viral infection in the U.S. today, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). At least 50 percent of sexually active people will get HPV at some time in their lives.

Perhaps the most alarming fact about HPV is its direct link to cervical cancer. Of the more than 10,000 U.S. cervical cancer cases in 2005, HPV was implicated in nearly all cases—99.7 percent, according to the CDC. In California alone it's estimated that about 1,400 women will have been diagnosed with cervical cancer this year.

A ‘Breakthrough’ Vaccine

Gardasil is an FDA-approved vaccine that aims to prevent diseases caused by HPV. It is available to females ages 9-26 and is covered by all major insurance carriers. The vaccine is a series of shots given over a six-month period and has no major side effects. It is very important for girls and women to receive all three vaccines for the best possible protection.

Mothers and daughters need to know the importance of this vaccine. Education is truly the key. I talk with my adult patients about their daughters and the vaccine. When someone comes for a well-woman visit, I try to give them as much information as possible.

The development of Gardasil marks a breakthrough in the prevention of cancer and disease. It reduces not only the risk of cervical cancer and its consequences, but also the financial and emotional burden involved with the whole process of working up an abnormal Pap test.

As we know, not all abnormal Pap smears indicate cancer, but they can require further examinations, biopsies, and rather unpleasant treatments for precancerous lesions. There is also the fact that the vaccine reduces the incidence of genital warts, which are not as dangerous, but carry an emotional stigma as well.

In Addition to Your Annual

Ideally, young females should get the vaccine before they are sexually active, but those who are sexually active may also benefit from the vaccine. The vaccine can be given at the same time as other vaccinations, such as Hepatitis B.

The vaccine is truly a great development that's become available; however, it does not replace an annual physical. A Pap test is the best way to screen for cervical cancer and girls should continue to visit their physician for this annual exam.

This vaccine is an incredibly exciting advancement in the field of women's health. Having your daughter immunized against HPV is one of those decisions that can help keep her safe and healthy for the future.

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