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HPV Vaccine Recommended for Young Women Between 9 and 26

Each year, as a new class of kindergarten students begins its school career, parents are required to produce evidence that their child has received all the required vaccinations before the child is admitted into the school system. But as most parents know, their job is not done. Additional vaccinations throughout childhood are still required or recommended.

One of the newest recommendations concerning childhood vaccinations concerns the human papillomavirus vaccine (HPV), which was licensed for use in females aged 9 to 26 by the FDA in 2006. A group of experts that advise the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on issues related to vaccines, known as the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), has recommended that all 11-12 year old girls receive the HPV vaccine. Further, the ACIP recommends females aged 13-26 who have not completed the vaccine series should be vaccinated as well. And in certain cases, it may also be advisable to vaccinate girls as young as 9 years of age.

The HPV vaccine protects females from the four types of human papillomavirus that are responsible for 70% of the cases of cervical cancer and 90% of genital warts in women. There are over 100 types of HPV, and about 30 of those can be sexually transmitted from person to person. Most HPV infections have no symptoms and go away by themselves over the period of a few years. According to the CDC, nearly all women will have HPV infections at some point; fortunately, few will develop cervical cancer.

HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection in this country and throughout the world. It is believed more than half of all sexually active people will be infected with HPV at some time in their lives. Currently, about 20 million Americans have HPV, and 6 million new cases are added each year. Girls between the ages of 15 and 24 account for half of these new infections.

Even though most cases of HPV go away on their own, those that do not are responsible for causing 70% of the known cases of cervical cancer. Sometimes the HPV lingers for years; the typical length of time from HPV infection to development of cervical cancer is decades. As a result, girls and young women infected with unresolved HPV may have no symptoms until they develop cervical cancer in their 40's and 50's. Worldwide,

300,000 women die from cervical cancer every year. In 2007, more than 11,000 American women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer, and approximately 4000 will die from this illness.

However, according to the National Cancer Institute, the number of deaths from cervical cancer potentially could be reduced by two-thirds if widespread vaccination of girls and young women around the world were conducted. That number could be even higher once ongoing tests for safety and efficacy of the vaccine in

women over 26 and in boys and men have been completed. If the tests are successful, the vaccine could be licensed and recommended for males as well as females.

Although the HPV vaccine is nearly 100% effective in preventing four types of HPV infection, parents should know that the HPV vaccine does not provide full protection until all three doses of the vaccine have been administered. Ideally, girls and young women should be vaccinated before becoming sexually active, because they have not yet have been exposed to any of the four types of HPV that are covered by the vaccine. However, even if a person has been sexually active and has been infected with one of the four types of HPV included in the vaccine, she should still be vaccinated to protect her from the other three types.

Even if they have been vaccinated for HPV, all women need to continue getting routine Pap tests to screen for any precancerous changes in cells, because the four types of HVP contained in the vaccine account for 70% of cervical cancer cases. That means that 30% of the cases have other causes, and need to be detected with a Pap test.

Although laws regarding required vaccinations vary from state to state, once a vaccine is recommended, most major insurance companies will cover its cost. “Medicaid coverage is already provided in accordance with ACIP standards, and immunizations are a mandatory service under Medicaid for eligible individuals under age 21,” according to the National Cancer Institute.

To learn more about HPV and the new HPV vaccine recommendations, visit the CDC’s website at www.cdc.gov/Features/PreteenVaccines (800-232-4636 / TTY: 888-232-6348) or the National Cancer Institute at www.cancer.gov (800-422-6237/ TTY: 800-332-8615). For additional information about this or other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org.)