

Health Tips for Parents

SEPTEMBER 2014 | VOLUME 105

Should I get my child vaccinated against HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common sexually transmitted disease that is associated with several types of cancer. Parents need to make an informed decision about whether their children should be vaccinated.



When the HPV vaccine first came out in 2006, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommended it for girls only, since the disease was most closely associated with cervical cancer. But additional studies linking HPV to cancers that also affect men prompted the FDA to approve the vaccine for boys in 2009.



Although national health authorities now recommend that 11-year-old girls and boys receive either the Gardasil or Cervarix vaccine, only 36 percent of teenage girls and 1 percent of teenage boys have received the full, three-dose series — mostly because parents mistakenly think their children don't need the vaccine if they aren't sexually active.

“The reason we give it so early is we want to protect boys and girls from the disease before there is any sexual contact,” says Martin Anderson, M.D., director of adolescent medicine at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. “Also, the vaccine is more likely to be effective when children are younger because their immune systems respond better to it.”

There are many strains of HPV but the most common are divided into two types: those that cause visible genital warts and those that do not cause visible warts but are associated with a higher incidence of cancers of the cervix, mouth, anus and genitals. Because some types of HPV do not cause visible signs of the disease, many people who become infected with the virus don't know they have it.

Statistics

About 20 million Americans, mostly teenagers and young adults, have HPV, making it the most common sexually transmitted disease in the nation. The disease, which can be spread by any kind of sexual contact, including oral sex, is so common that 75 percent of adults will be exposed to it sometime in their lives.

Why Vaccinate Boys

“There are many reasons we want to give HPV vaccine to males,” Dr. Anderson says. “The vaccine decreases their risk of contracting oral, penile and anal cancers related to HPV, as well as the possibility of contracting hard-to-treat warts. And since less than 40 percent of girls are getting the vaccine, we can ensure more people are protected against the disease by also vaccinating boys.”



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