

Cervical Cancer Vaccine Available

Will girls and women in your state have access?

For decades a wide-spread virus—human papillomavirus (HPV)—has been causing most cases of genital warts and cervical cancer in women. But a new and powerfully effective HPV vaccine has the potential to dramatically reduce the threat this virus poses to women’s health.

By Maria Mazzone Garrett



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ut will that potential be realized?

The answer in part depends on implementation of recommended vaccination practices. In late June, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), a panel of expert advisers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), recommended the vaccine for 11- to

12-year-old girls, and can be given to girls as young as 9 years old. The vaccine is also recommended for 13- to 26-year-old girls/women who have not yet received or completed the vaccine series. These recommendations are now being considered by the CDC.

“This vaccine represents an important medical breakthrough,” said Dr. Anne Schuchat, director of CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases. “As a result, these vaccine recommendations address a major health problem for women and represent a significant advance in women’s health.”

About the New Vaccines

Gardasil®, manufactured by Merck, is the first vaccine aimed at preventing cervical cancer. In June, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) licensed it for use in girls and women aged 9 to 26. Gardasil protects against four strains of HPV. Clinical trials found that the vaccine was 100 percent effective in preventing cases of high-grade pre-cancer and non-invasive cancer associated with two HPV types among the women who received it. Gardasil was also proved effective in preventing two HPV types, which cause 90 percent of all cases of genital warts.

GlaxoSmithKline is also developing a vaccine, Cervarix. Clinical trials are showing that it is equally as effective as Merck’s vaccine in preventing certain types of cervical cancer. Researchers found that 4.5 years after receiving the vaccine, women still have very high levels of antibodies against the disease. These findings indicate that the vaccine may be effective for the long term. Cervarix is expected to be submitted to the FDA for licensure later this year.

Vaccination Strategy

A major reason behind ACIP’s recommendation to vaccinate girls in their preteen to early teen years is to achieve vaccination before girls become sexually active. HPV infection rates peak among those in their late teens and early 20s. According to public health experts, this age range is also ideal from a medical

standpoint. One study found that girls between the ages of 10 and 14 produced at least twice as many antibodies to the virus as those in the 15 to 25 age group. According to researchers, this stronger immune response in the 10–14 year old age range could translate into a longer period of protection.

“The widespread availability of an HPV vaccine will help bring us one step closer to our goal of ensuring that no more women die of cervical cancer,” said Susan Crosby, president of Women In Government, a bipartisan organization of women legislators that has been active in encouraging states to establish cervical cancer elimination task forces. “An HPV vaccine should be part of a comprehensive approach to cervical cancer prevention, which also includes screening using advanced and appropriate technologies, such as HPV testing.”

Michigan state Sen. Bev Hammerstrom concurred with Crosby’s recommendation.

“For the HPV vaccine to achieve its true potential, it must be made available to all age-appropriate people, regardless of their socioeconomic status,” said Hammerstrom, the majority floor leader. “State policymakers play a vital role in ensuring this availability.”

The CDC also notes that while the effect of condoms in preventing HPV infection is unknown, condom use has been associated with a lower rate of cervical cancer, an HPV-associated disease.

What State Legislators Can Do

According to the Women in Government’s Web site, 39 states have enacted legislation creating state task forces aimed at developing effective public health strategies for eliminating cervical cancer. That’s a good start, say Hammerstrom and Crosby, who offered this advice to legislators looking for ways to become involved in preventing cervical cancer:

Work to ensure that your state adopts comprehensive cervical cancer prevention and elimination strategies. Crosby said it is particularly important that states fully implement the CDC guidelines regarding HPV immunization as well as any recommendations by your state’s cervical cancer elimination task force.

Educate yourself about the issue and about prevention strategies. Read “State of Cervical Cancer Prevention in America.” This report, produced by Women In Government, provides a state-by-state breakout of cervical cancer prevention and elimination strategies and ranks each state’s efforts.

Collaborate with your state’s National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program (NBCCEDP). This CDC program provides free cancer screening tests to uninsured and under-insured women in every state. Pap tests and regular cancer screening continue to drastically reduce cervical cancer incidence and mortality by effectively treating abnormalities before they progress to invasive cancer. Educating women about the importance of screening tests and ensuring that they have access to

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—Susan Crosby, president
Women In Government





Talking Points: HPV and Cervical Cancer

Key public health facts for legislators

- The most important risk factor for developing cervical cancer is persistent cervical infection with certain strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV).
- HPV is easily transmitted through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. The infection often lays dormant in the body for years before causing illness, so it is very difficult to know when or from whom one acquired the virus.
- Most sexually active people get genital HPV. By age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired an HPV infection. Most people will never know that they have HPV because usually there are no signs or symptoms and the virus goes away on its own.
- There are more than 30 strains of HPV that affect the genital tract. Of those, about 10 types are considered high-risk for progressing to cancer. HPV types 16, 18, 31 and 45 are the cause of more than 85 percent of the diagnoses of cervical cancer and high-risk pre-cancerous lesions.
- A new HPV vaccine has been licensed by the FDA for use in girls and women ages 9–26. The vaccine is highly effective in protecting women against HPV strains 16 and 18, which cause 70 percent of cervical cancers. Providing vaccinations to girls and young women before the onset of sexual activity will help protect the next generation from this preventable and deadly disease.
- The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be 9,710 new cases of invasive cervical cancer diagnosed in the United States in 2006, and about 3,700 women will die from the disease this year. The current incidence rate of cervical cancer among American women is eight cases per 100,000.
- Tests and screenings save lives. Widespread use of the Pap smear test to screen for and treat pre-cancerous conditions has led to a dramatic reduction in cervical cancer deaths. In the United States today, 50 percent of the women diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer have never had a screening test; an additional 10 percent have not been screened in at least the previous five years.

them is a critical component of any cancer prevention strategy—and you can help.

Understand how state laws may impact the delivery of this vaccine. Because this vaccine is delivered to 11–12 year olds as well as adolescents, it is important to understand how state law may impact the availability to receive the vaccine. Barriers may include consent laws as well as ability of the vaccine through school programs, family planning programs and other provider avenues. State laws related to financing of the vaccine may also impact its availability to all eligible individuals.

Spread the good news to your constituents. When talking to constituents, tell them that there's good news: Cervical cancer is preventable, and education, vaccination and early detection are the keys to effective prevention. Advise them to educate themselves and their family about HPV and cervical cancer to protect the next generation from this deadly but preventable disease.

For more information on HPV, visit the CDC's HPV Web site at www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/default.htm. Visit www.cdc.gov/cancer/nbccedp to get state contact information about CDC's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program.

Learn more about the Women In Government's anti-cervical cancer efforts at www.womeningovernment.org/prevention.

—*Maria Mazzone Garrett was formerly a visiting research associate at The Council of State Governments. This article will be printed in the Summer 2006 issue of Healthy States Quarterly. Previous issues of Healthy States Quarterly are available by visiting www.healthystates.csg.org.*

Source: Adapted from CDC's Human Papillomavirus Infection Web site. www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/default.htm