



All women need to know about human papillomavirus

By MARLENE FREEMAN/Solano Coalition for Better Health

Article Launched: 10/19/2008 07:21:40 AM PDT

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.

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. At least 50 percent of sexually active people will get HPV at some time in their lives, the CDC said.

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.

With an estimated 11,070 new cases each year and nearly 3,900 deaths, in California alone it's estimated that 1,400 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2008.

Studies have found the HPV vaccine to be almost 100 percent effective in preventing diseases caused by the four HPV types covered by the vaccine, including precancers of the cervix, vagina, vulva and genital warts. The vaccine is not as effective in preventing HPV-related disease in young women who have already been exposed to the virus.

'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.

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.

Annual addition

Ideally, females should get the vaccine before they are sexually active, but those who are sexually active may also benefit from it. 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.

Mother-daughter talks

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. 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.

Marlene Freeman, M.D., is an OB/GYN with Solano Regional Medical Group, the multiphysician medical group affiliated with Sutter Regional Medical Foundation, a member of the Solano Coalition for Better Health.