



HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)

Vaccine protection against cervical cancer

Q&A WITH EVAN SHAPIRO M.D.

As a gynecologist, every day I see patients in my office with abnormal pap smears and Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). HPV, a condition that has become so prevalent, is causing much confusion and misunderstanding for the layperson. Thankfully there are several ways to help prevent contracting HPV, and it is important that women understand the options available to them.

WE CAN REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD OF A WOMAN DEVELOPING HPV BY USING A VACCINE

IMAGE: What is HPV?

Dr. Shapiro: Human Papilloma Virus, also known as HPV, is a common virus that infects the skin and mucous membranes. There are over 100 types of HPV. This virus is so widespread it is reported by The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that as many as 80% of women and 50% of men and women combined will get a type of genital HPV at some point in their lives.

IM: How is it contracted?

Dr. S: Many are spread through skin-to-skin contact and cause common warts, like those we find on hands and feet. About 30 types are spread through direct genital contact and cause genital warts, abnormal cervical cells (dysplasia), and/or cervical cancer. HPV may also be passed on during oral sex, and also between same-sex partners – even when the infected partner has no signs or symptoms. A person can have HPV even if years have passed since he or she had sexual contact with an infected person. Most infected persons do not realize they are infected or that they are passing the virus on to a sex partner. In extremely rare cases, a pregnant woman with genital HPV can pass HPV to her baby during delivery.

IM: Are there any symptoms from HPV?

Dr. S: Most often, genital types of HPV do not cause any symptoms at all. Quite often, the infection goes away or is suppressed by the body and immune system before any problems develop. The American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists (ACOG) reports that studies show 20-30 percent of genital warts go away

on their own, without treatment, within three months. However, when the infection persists, it causes abnormal cells to form. The only way to know if you have the virus or abnormal cells that can potentially cause cervical cancer is by being screened regularly, using both a pap smear and the HPV test.

IM: Is there any way to treat, control, or prevent the virus?

Dr. S: We can reduce the likelihood of a woman developing HPV by using a vaccine. The HPV vaccine, developed by Merck (Gardasil), helps protect women from contracting the virus. The ACOG Committee on Adolescent Health Care and the ACOG Working Group on immunizations recommend the vaccination of females aged 9-26 years against HPV. The vaccine is given as an injection in 3 doses, at three different times. The first dose, followed by a second dose 2 months later, and finally a third dose given 6 months after the first dose.

IM: Does the drug have any side effects?

Dr. S: The vaccine has been well tolerated, and the most common side effects are pain, swelling, itching, and redness at the injection site, and fever. Some other side effects have been reported, but are extremely rare. Every woman should consult with their health care provider and decide if the vaccine is appropriate for them.

IM: How do you answer the concern that the drug only prevents certain strains of the virus?

Dr. S: There are over 100 types of HPV, and the vaccine helps protect against only a few of them. However, the types the vaccine does help protect against are responsible for approximately 70% of HPV-related cervical cancers and 90% of genital warts. The vaccine is a preventative tool and NOT a substitute for cancer screening.

IM: When do you feel girls should begin receiving the injections?

Dr. S: It is best to give the vaccine (complete 3 doses) to women before they are sexually active. The vaccine may be less effective in women who have been exposed to HPV before vaccination than in women who were never exposed to HPV at the time of vaccination. The vaccine will not protect a woman against HPV types that she may have already been exposed to. However, even women with previous HPV infection will benefit from the vaccine by developing protection against the disease caused by some of the types of HPV with which they have not been infected.

The vaccine also will not protect against other diseases that are not caused by HPV and it will not prevent pregnancy. It is very important to talk with your health care provider about HPV and decide if you or your child should receive the vaccine.

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