

HPV vaccines offer disease protection pre-teens can grow into—now for girls and boys



Thinkstock

When it comes to their kids, parents are always planning. Healthy dinners. Safe activities. One plan that's easy to make could have a tremendous benefit, even saving a life. That's planning to have pre-teens vaccinated against HPV, the leading cause of cervical cancer in women.

“There are about 12,000 new cervical cancer cases each year in the United States,” said Dr. Melinda Wharton, deputy director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “Cervical cancer causes about 4,000 deaths in U.S. women each year. But getting vaccinated against HPV greatly reduces the chances that today's girls will ever have to face this devastating disease.”

CDC recommends HPV vaccination for 11- and 12-year-old girls, as well as for young women ages 13 through 26 who have not yet been vaccinated.

Two HPV vaccines—Cervarix and Gardasil—are available for girls to protect against the HPV types that cause most cervical cancers. Gardasil also protects against the HPV types that cause most genital warts.

Boys and young men can also get Gardasil to prevent genital warts. The same ages for vaccination apply for boys and young men.

Both brands of HPV vaccine are given in three doses (shots) over six months, and protection requires all three doses. “Completing the three-dose HPV vaccine series is very important to ensure protection against HPV-related disease,” Dr. Wharton said.

While vaccinating against a sexually transmitted virus at age 11 or 12 might seem unnecessary, the pre-teen years are the *best* time to vaccinate. “The HPV vaccine only provides protection if it is given before exposure to HPV,” said Dr. Wharton. “Someone can be infected with HPV the very first time they have sexual contact with another person.” To get the most benefit from HPV vaccination, all three doses must be received before any kind of sexual activity with another person begins.

Atlanta mom Amber Zirkle recognizes the importance of vaccinating her children now for protection they'll need in the future. Her 11-year-old daughter will get an HPV vaccine this year at her regular check-up. As for getting HPV vaccine for her 16-year-old son, Amber said, “I didn't know it was available for boys. I'll talk with the pediatrician about it.” She added, “Genital warts aren't something I want my son to deal with.”

Other vaccines recommended specifically for pre-teens include meningococcal conjugate, which protects against bacterial meningitis, and Tdap, which boosts immunity against pertussis (whooping cough). Everyone age six months and older should get an annual flu vaccine.

To learn more, visit www.cdc.gov/vaccines or call 800-CDC-INFO.