Ask an expert: What are the health implications of HPV and cervical cancer

by Linda Bernhard/The Ohio State University

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HPV is a very common sexually transmitted disease; 15% of the population is affected at any time. Over half of sexually active women and men will be infected with some type of HPV in their lifetime, but most of those affected are between the ages of 15 and 24.

Unfortunately, HPV often has no symptoms, so women especially do not know they have it. In addition, the infection usually clears without treatment, and although it is undetectable in most women within two years of the infection, it can remain in the body for many years.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among women world-wide; however, in the United States, it is not among the top 10 causes of new cancers in women each year. This is primarily because of the routine use of Pap testing and early treatment of cervical dysplasias that could have become cancers.

All women should have regular Pap smears, beginning with the onset of sexual activity or at age 18.

The connection between HPV and cervical cancer

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of more than 100 different virus types, each of which can cause different health problems including: common, plantar, and genital warts, skin and cervical cancers. Two types of HPV, 6 and 11, are responsible for 90% of genital warts. Two other types, 16 and 18, are responsible for about 70% of cervical cancers.

HPV Vaccine

In 2006 a new vaccine for HPV (Gardasil) was approved by the FDA and made commercially available. Gardasil provides protection against four types of HPV—types 6 and 11 that cause genital warts and types 16 and 18 that cause cervical cancer.

Like other vaccines, Gardasil needs to be given before exposure to the infection. Thus, Gardasil is recommended for routine immunization of girls, ages 11-12.

"Catch-up" immunization can be given to girls and young women, ages 13-26, who have not engaged in sexual activity. "Catch-up" immunization can also be given to girls and young women, ages 13-26, who have had sexual activity in the past but have not been immunized.

"Catch-up" immunization can also be given to women who have been immunized in the past but who have had sexual activity in the past and who have not been immunized. "Catch-up" immunization can also be given to women who have been immunized in the past but who have had sexual activity in the past and who have not been immunized.

For more information, visit the NetWellness Women's Health health topic.

This week's NetWellness column is authored by Linda A. Bernhard, an associate professor in the College of Nursing at The Ohio State University.

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