Another reason to get the HPV vaccine: Half of men in general population infected

By ACSH Staff — March 1, 2011

A study released yesterday in The Lancet reveals that about 50 percent of men in the general population are infected with the human papillomavirus (HPV). Though approximately 120 different strains of HPV exist, the most worrisome types — HPV-16 and HPV-18 — are sexually transmitted and cancer-causing (oncogenic). After analyzing 1,159 men between the ages of 18 and 70 from the U.S., Brazil and Mexico, researchers found that six percent of men each year will acquire the HPV-16 infection, which is known to cause cervical cancer in women and other cancers in men. In fact, 32,000 cancer cases in both men and women, including cancer of the cervix, vagina, vulva, penis, oral cavity, head and neck and anus, were attributed to HPV in 2009.

The new figures prompt public health officials and ACSH staffers to ask: should boys be vaccinated against HPV? “The real question should be ‘why shouldn’t they?’” says ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan. “People think that HPV is only associated with cervical cancer and it ends there, but it doesn’t. It can cause a whole slew of cancers — and other diseases — in both males and females, but regrettably, many parents are more interested in their sons’ health than in the health of the sexual partners their sons may be infecting. We need a forceful public health educational program to tell parents: ‘This new evidence shows that by vaccinating your son, you’re protecting him as well.’"

When it comes to the HPV vaccine, there are several sources of controversy, some more valid than others, says ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross. “When you talk about mandating parents to vaccinate their pre-teens and teens against a sexually transmitted disease, there is an abundance of misinformation. Many groups continue to promote this misinformation without any scientific basis and feel that an HPV vaccine will encourage promiscuity or early sexual exposure among teens, which is just not so.”

If the benefits of vaccinating both boys and girls against HPV are scientifically clear, why then the persistent controversy? In part, this is because the disease is not easily communicable, like whooping cough or measles, so parents are not required to have their children vaccinated to protect young classmates. Also, there is the matter of cost to consider since the necessary three doses of the HPV vaccine can run up to $400, says Dr. Ross. But as Dr. Joseph Monsonego of the Institute of the Cervix in Paris, France says in a linked commentary to the published study, “As more diseases are prevented through male vaccination, notably anal cancer, the greater the cost-effectiveness of routine vaccination of both sexes.”