Rise in HPV-related throat cancers: Another reason for vaccinating boys too

By ACSH Staff — October 4, 2011

The results of a new study published in The Journal of Clinical Oncology reveal a worrisome trend: Throat cancers caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV) are on the rise, especially among men. Led by the chairwoman of cancer research at Ohio State University, researchers sampled 271 patients with certain types of throat cancer between 1984 and 2004 and found that the virus was present in 72 percent of the cancers diagnosed after 2000, compared to just 16 percent of samples tested during the 1980s.

HPV is spread through sexual contact and is linked to the causation of cervical cancer, as well as anal cancer and genital warts which can occur in both genders. HPV types 16 and 18 account for approximately 70 percent of cervical cancer cases. The new trend in increased HPV-related throat cancers, however, may be attributable to a rise in oral sex particularly among younger generations of sexually active people who mistakenly consider this practice safer.

Although pap smears may be used to detect precancerous cervical growths, there is currently no screening test available for throat cancer. Instead, some medical groups are recommending that boys be protected against HPV by being vaccinated against the virus. Gardasil and Cervarix, manufactured by Merck and GlaxoSmithKline, respectively, are the HPV vaccines currently recommended for girls (boys can also be vaccinated to reduce their risk of genital warts associated with HPV). But if ACSH’s Dr. Elizabeth Whelan had her way, she would make the vaccine mandatory for both girls and boys: Look at all of the lives that can be saved by administering these simple shots, she observes.

Though the incidence of HPV-related throat cancers has increased by three-fold over a 20 year period, it’s still fairly uncommon, causing 10,000 cases a year, observes ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross. Slightly over a quarter of women in the U.S. have HPV which is the most common sexually transmitted disease. Yet the overwhelming majority will not go on to develop cancer, he says. Throat cancer has traditionally been associated with older men who have a history of smoking and drinking, so it’s a bit scary that we’re now finding it more commonly among younger people. This, however, should provide further evidence to support vaccinating all young people against HPV.