A vaccine that prevents cancer that's not being used!

By ACSH Staff — August 16, 2012

Is there a safe, effective vaccine that not only protects young people from the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in America, but also protects them from a wide variety of cancers later on? If I were to tell you that such a vaccine exists, but only a small minority of teens receives this protection, would you be shocked, surprised?

This is not some vain, pie-in-the-sky hope: it's real. A vaccine against the common human papillomavirus (HPV) has been available for five years now in fact, there are now two similar vaccines, and they're both safe and effective. And as it turns out, HPV not only causes STDs, such as genital warts, it also is the primary cause of cancer of the cervix.

Studies have shown that girls who receive the vaccine before they get exposed to the virus, usually in their late teens, are almost completely protected from precancerous changes of the cervix. Cervical cancer still affects ten thousand, killing four thousand victims each year in the U.S.

If parents followed the science and common sense there would be a rush on doctors offices, kids in tow, demanding the inoculation immediately. Yet, for a variety of reasons, only about one-quarter of girls and young women who should be vaccinated, actually get the three shots required for full protection.

Some of the reasons for this unacceptable ignorance of or disdain for the HPV vaccine's protection include: the cost; myths about vaccinating pre-teens and teens against a sexually-transmitted infection somehow encouraging experimentation; and generalized anti-vaccine fears. Because of the large numbers of Americans especially younger age groups, teenagers who are exposed to HPV each year, the low uptake of the vaccine presents both a huge public health problem, and an enormous opportunity for benefit.

Consider these facts [1]: Each year, six million of us become infected with HPV; at any time, 20 million are infected; and over half of sexually active women and men pick up HPV at some point. Most of the time, our immune systems fight off the virus, just like a cold. But sometimes, the infection persists: it's those persistent cases that can lead to cervical cancer.

And it's not just cervical cancer and it's not just girls. It takes two to tango, as they say, and HPV transmission [2] (like all STIs) goes both ways. Men who have HPV are at higher risk of genital warts, and also of cancers of the penis and anus. Women also are at increased risk of anal cancer a recent tragic example was former Charlie's Angel Farah Fawcett. And recent studies [3] have shown that both sexes are susceptible to oral and pharyngeal (throat) cancer from HPV.

So now that you know the facts about HPV and the safe, effective vaccine to thwart its potentially lethal effects, why not make sure your kids get vaccinated. The best time to get the shot is before their first possible exposure to HPV: before they start having sex, in the age group 9 through 16.
But if they missed that window, they still can benefit, probably, up to age 26. And that includes boys, too. Remember, an ounce of prevention applies to HPV as much as anywhere else!

"A vaccine that prevents cancer that's not being used!" (Examiner.com)  [4]