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HPV Vaccine: Pros and Cons

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There has been a lot in the media about Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and the new vaccine to prevent this sexually transmitted disease (STD), including a commercial encouraging you to be “one less,” but are you aware of the facts about this vaccine? This fact sheet is for parents or caregivers and teens who may be unaware of the different sides of the debate over this vaccine. It is intended to provide a brief summary of the issues. This fact sheet is only intended to provide an overview; as with all health issues, please consult with your health provider for more information.

The Debate

In 2007 there were two vaccines introduced to guard against HPV. With the release of these new drugs, came much controversy. Because it involves one of the most controversial issues in recent times—teenage sexual health—both those who are for and against the vaccine have stood up to have their voice heard. Some think that it is a great advancement in modern medicine and all teenagers should receive it. Others think the vaccine would only encourage more teens to be promiscuous. Still others question whether we should add yet another vaccine to the many received in childhood. This debate increased as the governor of Texas made it a mandated vaccine for all 6th graders entering public schools by 2008, and other states began to consider replicating such measures. However, to understand the possible need for such a vaccine, one must first understand the risks that HPV brings and the link between HPV and cervical cancer.

HPV Facts

There are actually over 70 identified strains of HPV. Numbers vary slightly, but it has been estimated that 50 percent of males will have HPV at some point in their life, and 80 percent of females will have some strain of HPV at some point by the time they are 50 years old. Many of the strains are latent, which means you could be a carrier, not have symptoms, and pass it on without knowing it. Some of the strains naturally resolve themselves and go away; however, there are some strains that can be more dangerous. Some of the strains cause warts on the genital area of men and women, and some of the strains lead to cervical cancer in women and other less common cancers such as anus, vagina, and vulva.

In the 1970s when the pap test was introduced, the rates of those who died from cervical cancer severely declined, due to earlier detection. This advance in medi-

Facts from the CDC

- The vaccine:
 - Is recommended by multiple medical organizations and vaccines are FDA and USDA approved.
 - Is recommended for girls 11–13, but is FDA approved for women ages 9–26.
 - Defends against 4 strains of HPV.
 - Does not treat HPV; guards against it.
- You cannot get HPV from vaccine.
- Condoms are not fully effective in preventing the spread of HPV.
- It is still necessary to have regular PAP tests by your doctor.

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The vaccine guards against four of the HPV strains—two that have been shown to cause 70% of the cervical cancer cases, and two that have been linked to 90% of the genital warts cases (CDC, n.d.; NIH, n.d). • According to one study, “vaccination of the entire population would prevent more than 200,000 HPV infections, 100,000 abnormal Pap tests, and 3,300 cases of cervical cancer” (Pichichero, 2007). • The vaccine has been licensed by the FDA and has been deemed safe and effective by the CDC (CDC, n.d.). • HPV vaccines are recommended by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The American Academy of Pediatrics’ committee on Infectious Diseases — The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices — The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The vaccine doesn’t prevent all strains that can cause cervical cancer. • Because it is relatively new, little is known about long term effects. • There have been some claims of negative effects such as fainting, headaches, and dizziness after taking the HPV vaccine. • Some parents think it is too early—as young as age 9—to vaccinate for a sexually transmitted disease • Some parents believe that it will provide their daughters a sense of safety, and their teens will become more sexually promiscuous • Some parents feel there are already too many vaccines.

cine allowed doctors to detect cervical cancer while it is still treatable. However due to cost and lack of health insurance, there are still numerous women who do not get regular tests, and the cancer is not caught in time. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports, “every year, about 12,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and almost 4,000 women die from this disease in the U.S.”(CDC n.d.). The HPV vaccine guards against four strains of HPV. Two are known to lead to 70% of the cases of cervical cancer, and two others have been linked to causing genital warts.

The vaccine does not treat HPV; it only guards against the disease attacking the body. Doctors recommend that the vaccine be administered to girls ages 11–14, so that they receive the vaccine before they become sexually active. Because of the nature of the way the STD is spread (skin on skin contact), condoms are not fully effective in preventing the spread of HPV. It is also important to note that because the vaccine does not prevent all strains of the HPV disease, all women, even those vaccinated, should still have regular doctor visits and PAP smears.

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