

HPV

HPV (genital human papillomavirus) is the most common sexually transmitted disease. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, roughly 20 million Americans have the virus. The primary reason to be concerned about HPV is that it is the major cause of cervical cancer, which kills about 250,000 women worldwide each year.

Top 3 Reasons HPV Vaccination Won't Lead to Teen Promiscuity

1. The vaccine starts doctor/teen conversations. "My experience with the HPV vaccine is that it has given pediatricians an opportunity to open up the discussion of sex, STDs, and pregnancy with younger patients," says pediatrician Dr. Cara Natterson.
2. The vaccine starts teen/parent conversations. "Because I need to speak with both parents and teens about shots, the HPV vaccine was often a conversation starter. In my own practice, it only enhanced my ability to talk with kids about the physical and emotional dangers of having sex at too young an age," explains Dr. Natterson.
3. The vaccine helps teens understand the seriousness of having sex. Dr. Natterson says, "It lends gravity to the discussion of STDs -- because there is a shot out there to prevent one (and because most girls get the shot, and it kind of hurts), teens understand that these STDs are not just theoretical diseases that cannot affect them."

In 2006, the FDA approved the Gardasil[®] vaccine for use in girls ages 9 to 26. Doctors suggest the vaccine be given to young girls, preferably before they have sex -- a prescription that has not been without some controversy.

What Moms Should Know about HPV Vaccine

While it is estimated that 80% of all women (and 50% of men and women combined) will get one or more types of "genital" HPV at some point in their lives, generally the body's immune system is able to fight off or suppress the HPV virus before it causes problems. However, HPV has been linked to vulvar, vaginal, penile, and anal cancer -- in addition to cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine Gardasil protects against four strains of HPV, including two connected to most cervical cancers. The CDC says the vaccine does not protect women against about 30% of cervical cancers, so routine Pap tests are important. The vaccine does not protect against other sexually transmitted diseases or infections.

The most common side effect of the Gardasil vaccine is the pain of the shot, according to the CDC. There have been reports of teens fainting after receiving the vaccine, so patients are urged to remain at the doctor's office for 15 minutes after their shot. The CDC says there have been no serious side effects found in studies of the vaccine.

Although the HPV shot may initially sting more than most others, according to pediatrician Dr. Cara Natterson, the pain usually goes away in several minutes.

Dr. Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe, MD, FAAP, is the CEO and chief editor of the website Pediatrics Now. She encourages moms to get their daughters vaccinated, saying, "Yes, vaccinate! It is very safe and has few side effects beyond the expected discomfort. Your tween daughter should get it when she's 11 or 12. In fact, I'm planning on giving the vaccine to both my girls."

Studies have also shown that the vaccine works best if girls have not already gotten one of the HPV subtypes associated with cervical cancer.

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