Do My Children Need the HPV Vaccine?

By: Denise Olson, mother of four living in the East Valley

Like all good moms, I want my kids to grow up safe and healthy. I want to make decisions that will benefit them right now, but I also need to think about things that could help them in the future. I feel like it's a big job and a lot is depending on me. That is why I wanted to learn about the HPV vaccine before my children were old enough to get it. I wanted to make an informed choice, and I had all kinds of questions! What is HPV, anyway? Could a vaccine actually protect my children from cancer? Why is the vaccine given at 11?

I hope that as I explain the answers I found to my questions I can get other parents thinking about their own children, and maybe convince a few to protect their children not only now but in the future.

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What is HPV, anyway?

HPV stands for Human Papilloma Virus. Like many vaccines my children have already received, this vaccine provides protection against a virus by training a person's immune system to recognize and destroy the virus when it enters the body. HPV lives on soft mucous membranes and skin. Usually, it can be found on the genitals of an infected person, but it can also infect the anus, mouth, and throat. HPV is spread by infected skin or membranes touching and not by bodily fluids. Some strains of HPV viruses cause genital warts, and others can cause tumors or cancers to grow. While there are many different types of HPV viruses, the latest HPV vaccine will protect against nine types, or strains, of the virus. These strains are the most common and/or cancer causing strains.

Can the HPV vaccine actually protect my child from cancer?

Yes! The HPV vaccine protects against cancer by training the body to find and destroy these viruses before they have a chance to cause the infections that lead to cancer. After a series of shots, a vaccinated person's body will be able to recognize and destroy these viruses for many years, possibly an entire lifetime.

The primary cancer the HPV vaccine is designed to protect against is cervical cancer, the same cancer that is checked for when women go in for a Pap smear. However, because the vaccine stops dangerous HPV viruses anywhere in the body, it helps protect against some cancers of the penis, throat, mouth, and anus. This is one reason it is recommended for boys as well as for girls. (The other reason is to stop the transmitting of the virus to uninfected women.)

Why do we vaccinate instead of screen?

Some have argued that because we can screen for cervical cancer the vaccine is unnecessary. While many times it is possible to detect and treat cervical cancer, treatment is not without risks. Not only is there emotional and physical pain involved with treating cancer, but a woman's cervix may be compromised during treatment and affect her ability to carry a child later in life. Also, many women fail to get regular Pap smears and may not detect cancer until it is too late.

"The HPV vaccine stops dangerous HPV viruses anywhere in your body."

Other types of cancers linked to the HPV virus (penile, throat, and anus) are not commonly screened for and may not be detected until they have caused a very serious problem. Screening is important and will continue to be important, but as they say "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Why is the vaccine given at age 11?

The HPV vaccine is given beginning at age 11 and followed up by two boosters before the age of 13. The shots are given at that time because this is when scientific studies have determined it will be most effective at producing strong antibodies against HPV. Another reason is that some (though certainly not all) teenagers may have had sexual contact of some kind and possibly contracted the infection by the time they are in their late teen years.

The recommendation is NOT given because doctors feel children will become sexually active at 11, nor is there any evidence that receiving it at eleven makes them any more likely to become sexually active. It is given at 11 to provide them the most protection possible as soon as possible. Those who are vaccinated early will still have protection for when they do eventually have sexual contact with someone - even if it is twenty years down the road.

Thank you for taking the time to consider the information I have gathered in answer to questions I personally had about the HPV vaccine. I hope that the information I've gathered can help you understand the risks of HPV and why there is a vaccine to protect against it. My daughter is only eight-years-old, but she will get her vaccine at 11, so she can be safe in the present as well as the future. When my sons are old enough, they will get the vaccine too.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

www.VoicesforVaccines.org
www.WhyImmunize.org
www.ecbt.org
www.momswhovax.blogspot.com

Discover WhyImmunize.org

tapi The Arizona Partnership for Immunization