What Parents Should Know About HPV Vaccine Safety and Effectiveness

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HPV vaccines prevent cancer

About 14 million people, including teens, become infected with human papillomavirus (HPV) each year. When HPV infections persist, people are at risk for cancer. Every year, approximately 17,600 women and 9,300 men are affected by cancers caused by HPV. HPV vaccination could prevent many of these cancers.

HPV vaccines are safe

There are two vaccines licensed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and recommended by CDC to protect against HPV-related illness. All vaccines used in the United States are required to go through extensive safety testing before they are licensed by FDA. Once in use, they are continually monitored for safety and effectiveness.

Numerous research studies have been conducted to make sure HPV vaccines were safe both before and after the vaccines were licensed. No serious safety concerns have been confirmed in the large safety studies that have been done since HPV vaccine became available in 2006. CDC and FDA have reviewed the safety information available to them for both HPV vaccines and have determined that they are both safe.

The HPV vaccine is made from one protein from the HPV virus that is not infectious (cannot cause HPV infection) and non-oncogenic (does not cause cancer).

HPV vaccines work

The HPV vaccine works extremely well. In the four years after the vaccine was recommended in 2006, the amount of HPV infections in teen girls decreased by 56%. Research has also shown that fewer teens are getting genital warts since HPV vaccines have been in use. In other countries such as Australia, research shows that HPV vaccine has already decreased the amount of pre-cancer of the cervix in women, and genital warts have decreased dramatically in both young women and men.

HPV vaccines provide long-lasting protection

Data from clinical trials and ongoing research tell us that the protection provided by HPV vaccine is long-lasting. Currently, it is known that HPV vaccine works in the body for at least 10 years without becoming less effective. Data suggest that the protection provided by the vaccine will continue beyond 10 years.

HPV vaccine is recommended and safe for boys

One HPV vaccine (Gardasil) is recommended for boys. This vaccine can help prevent boys from getting infected with the HPV-types that can cause cancers of the mouth/throat, penis and anus as well as genital warts.

Like any vaccine or medicine, HPV vaccines might cause side effects

HPV vaccines occasionally cause adverse reactions. The most commonly reported symptoms among females and males are similar, including injection-site reactions (such as pain, redness, or swelling in the area of the upper arm where the vaccine is given), dizziness, fainting, nausea, and headache.

Brief fainting spells and related symptoms can happen after many medical procedures, including vaccination. Fainting after getting a shot is more common among adolescents. Sitting or lying down for about 15 minutes after a vaccination can help prevent fainting and injuries that can be caused by falls.

When fainting was found to happen after vaccination, FDA changed prescribing information to include information about preventing falls and possible injuries from fainting after vaccination. CDC consistently reminds doctors and nurses to share this information with all their patients. Tell the doctor or nurse if your child feels dizzy, faint, or light-headed.

HPV vaccines don't negatively affect fertility

There is no evidence to suggest that HPV vaccine causes fertility problems. However, not getting HPV vaccine leaves people vulnerable to HPV cancers. If persistent high-risk HPV infection in a woman leads to cervical cancer, the treatment of cervical cancer (hysterectomy, chemotherapy, or radiation, for example) could leave a woman unable to have children. Treatment for cervical pre-cancer could put a woman at risk for problems with her cervix, which could cause preterm delivery or other problems.

How can I get help paying for these vaccines?

The Vaccines for Children (VFC) program provides vaccines for children ages 18 years and younger, who are not insured, Medicaid-eligible, American Indian or Alaska Native. You can find out more about the VFC program by going online to www.cdc.gov and typing VFC in the search box.

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