



## NEW VACCINE FOR GIRLS PREVENTS CERVICAL CANCER

July 3, 2006

*In a development health officials are calling a historic breakthrough, girls and women aged 11 to 26 will soon receive a vaccine against one form of deadly cancer.*

The new vaccine, Gardasil, protects against four strains of the human papillomavirus, the most common sexually transmitted disease.

An estimated half of all women have been exposed to the virus, which, for unknown reasons can cause cancer of the cervix, the narrow part of the uterus just above the vagina.

Over 9,000 women in the United States contract cervical cancer each year and about 3,700 die.

Pre-cancerous changes in the cervix can be detected by a Pap smear test, but many poor women or women without health insurance don't get the test every year as recommended.

Dr. Anne Schuchat, director of the immunization program at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, called Gardasil "a breakthrough for women's health."

### **What is the vaccine?**

The vaccine, created by the drug company Merck, is made up of virus-like particles that trigger a woman's immune system to react as if she's been infected. The immune reaction prevents the changes in the cervix and can eventually develop into cancer.

The U.S. Health Department has created a "catch-up" campaign focusing on girls from 13 to 18. Going forward, it will seek to vaccinate all 11 and 12 year olds routinely.

However, Gardasil is supposed to be given as three shots over six months, and while that's the way many infant vaccinations work, government officials worry it will be harder to get preteens in the doctor's office that frequently.

## **Protecting poor girls and women**

Another obstacle is Gardasil's price: \$360 for the three-shot regimen.

"This vaccine will be more expensive than all other childhood vaccines put together," said John Schiller, a senior investigator at the National Cancer Institute, according to the Associated Press. "How do you make sure it gets to the poor women who need it the most?"

In the United States, girls without insurance should be able to get the vaccine through Vaccines for Children, a government program that distributes nearly half of all vaccines.

## **Conservative concerns**

There are also concerns among some conservative and religious groups that the vaccine will encourage girls to have sex because it prevents a sexually transmitted disease.

"You can't catch the virus, you have to go out and get it with sexual behavior," said Linda Klepacki of Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian group based in Colorado Springs, in *The New York Times*. "We can prevent it by having the best public health method, and that's not having sex before marriage."

## **Should the vaccine be mandatory?**

State health organizations are now considering whether to make the vaccine mandatory, but officials say the nature of the virus complicates the debate.

"Because it's a sexually transmitted infection, it's going to be a somewhat different situation than for other vaccines, such as chicken pox and so on, that can be transmitted through something as simple as a sneeze," said Dr. Elizabeth Garner of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston in a June 9 NewsHour interview.

"Human papillomavirus is not transmitted that way, and so it might be a little bit more difficult to make the argument that it needs to be mandatory for school attendance."

*-- Compiled by Leah Clapman for NewsHour Extra*

© 2006 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions