HPV Vaccination Provides Best Protection Against Cervical Cancer

January is Cervical Health Awareness Month

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — January 8, 2020 — Studies show the vaccination rate against the human papillomavirus (HPV) still lags across the U.S., and that is troubling news given that vaccination against HPV provides the best protection against cervical cancer among women.

Cervical Health Awareness Month is observed in January by experts, advocates and individuals concerned with women’s cervical health and cervical cancer, and Kaiser Permanente encourages the general public to learn more about how to best protect oneself against this preventable disease.

“All women are at risk for cervical cancer,” says Maricela Rodriguez-Gutierrez, Obstetrics/Gynecology department at Kaiser Permanente Los Angeles Medical Center. “It occurs most often in women over age 30, and long-lasting infection with certain types of HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer. The good news is that cervical cancer is highly preventable through screening tests and the HPV vaccine.”

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, about 79 million Americans currently have HPV, and many of them are unaware that they are infected. Also, more than 11,000 women in the U.S. get cervical cancer each year. The HPV vaccine is the best way to prevent HPV and cervical cancer.

HPV is a common virus that is passed from one person to another during sex. In addition to HPV, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes other risk factors for cervical cancer include:

- Having HIV or another condition that makes it hard for your body to fight off health problems.
- Smoking
- Using birth control for a long time (five or more years).
- Having given birth to three or more children.
- Having several sexual partners.

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In addition to getting vaccinated, the most important thing you can do to help prevent cervical cancer is to have regular screening tests starting at age 21, says Dr. Rodriguez-Gutierrez. The Pap smear looks for pre-cancerous cell changes on the cervix, which could lead to cervical cancer if not treated appropriately. The HPV test looks for the virus that can cause these cell changes.

“Early on, cervical cancer may not cause signs or symptoms,” says Dr. Rodriguez-Gutierrez. “However, advanced cervical cancer may cause abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge. What’s important to know is that most deaths from cervical cancer could be prevented by vaccinations, regular screenings and follow-up care.”

Kaiser Permanente urges parents of pre-teens to contact their pediatrician to inquire about the HPV vaccine. It’s worth noting that both boys and girls need the vaccine.

For additional information on this topic, Kaiser Permanente offers the following resources:

- Facts about cervical cancer screening (video)
- Cervical Cancer Screening
- Study finds a more effective way to test for HPV
- Large study finds HPV vaccination does not negatively impact fertility in adolescents

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