Main Line HealthCare



Vaccine for Prevention of Cervical Cancer by Carol Coldren, MD Great Valley OB/GYN

Cervical cancer is the second most frequent cause of cancer related deaths in women worldwide. The use of pap smears has lead to a decrease in cervical cancer mortality by 70% in the U.S. over the past 50 years. Nonetheless, in this country alone, 14,000 women are diagnosed with this disease, and about 4000 die annually.

Over 99% of cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers are caused by the sexually transmitted Human Papilloma Viruses (HPV), which also cause genital warts. About 40 types of HPV can infect the lower genital tract. A new vaccine that will help protect against four of them (Types 6, 11, 16, and 18) has recently been approved by the FDA. These four cause roughly 70% of the lower genital tract neoplasms, and 90% of genital warts. Called Gardasil, the vaccine consists of three doses costing \$120 each, to be given over the course of six months, ideally before someone becomes sexually active. It has been tested on and thus far approved for females aged 9 to 26 years old. The vaccine will not cause infection. It will not treat existing disease, or replace the need for periodic pap smears.

Because serious disease generally takes years to develop after exposure to HPV, it may take decades for the benefits to become apparent. Ultimately, use of the vaccine will decrease the incidence of cervical, vaginal, and vulvar cancers, pre-cancers, and genital warts significantly — good news for generations to come.