

The HPV Vaccine and Pap Tests: What Every Woman Should Know About Preventing Cervical Cancer

(NAPSA)—It is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the United States, yet with no obvious symptoms, many people never even know they have it. Left undetected, though, certain types of the human papillomavirus (HPV) can lead to cervical cancer, a disease that will strike more than 10,000 women in the U.S. in 2006.

Recent medical advancements have been made, however, to help stop this disease.

The FDA approved the first HPV vaccine to prevent cervical cancer, and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended that the vaccine be given to girls aged 11 and 12.

But what does this mean for other women? Is the vaccine just for preteens? And do women no longer need to get Pap tests?

Pathologists—physicians who study tissues and cells to identify and diagnose cervical cancer, HPV and other diseases—offer some guidelines:

“The HPV vaccine is most effective for those individuals who have not been sexually active,” said Paula Szytko, M.D., FCAP, a pathologist at North State Pathology Associates, PA in High Point, N.C. “And, while the vaccine is a medical advancement, it does not protect against all strains of HPV. Women should continue to get regular Pap tests. They could save her life.”

Since the introduction of Pap screening programs in the U.S., the number of cervical cancer cases has decreased by 70 percent. In fact, pathologists regard the Pap test as the most effective tool to prevent cervical cancer, because it detects and allows for treatment of early precancerous changes in the cervix before invasive cancer has a chance to develop.

HPV Facts And Stats

- The HPV vaccine is most effective for those who have not been sexually active.
- The HPV vaccine does not protect against all strains of HPV, so women still need to get regular Pap tests.



In addition to the Pap test, the HPV DNA test identifies women who have an HPV infection. If a woman has an infection, however, that does not mean that she will automatically get cervical cancer.

“In most cases, an HPV infection is temporary, and is cleared by the immune system without treatment in less than two years,” said Dr. Szytko. “However, infection by high-risk HPV, especially when the infection is not detected and persists for many years, can sometimes cause cervical cells to become precancerous and possibly cancerous.”

So, HPV test or Pap test? Pathologists offer insights into what is best for you:

“For women under 30, the Pap test alone is still best. When the HPV test is administered to younger women, it will likely identify many who are HPV positive and may cause unnecessary anxiety,” said Dr. Szytko.

“For women aged 30 and older, it is appropriate that they have both a Pap test and an HPV test to further enhance their chances for identifying precancerous changes and an early diagnosis.”

For more information regarding HPV and Pap tests, visit www.cap.org, or to register for an e-mail to schedule a cervical cancer screening test visit www.MyHealthTestReminder.com, a free Internet-based public service provided by the College of American Pathologists.