

CERVICAL CANCER VACCINE RECOMMENDED FOR GIRLS

What happened? A new weapon in the fight against cervical cancer will soon appear on the official childhood immunization schedule.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has given its approval to Gardasil, a vaccine that prevents the most common types of human papillomavirus (HPV) — the virus that causes most cervical cancers and genital warts. Following FDA approval of the vaccine, the National Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices unanimously voted to recommend routine vaccination for girls age 11 and 12, as well as girls and women ages 13 to 26 if they haven't received the vaccine already. Final recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are pending.

HPV spreads through sexual contact. The vaccine is most effective if given to girls before they become sexually active. The vaccine could be given to girls as young as age 9 in three doses over six months. Although HPV infection affects both males and females, the vaccine is currently available only to females.

In a two-year study involving more than 12,000 women, Gardasil was 100 percent effective against four types of HPV. Two of these cause about 70 percent of cervical cancers, and all four cause about 90 percent of genital warts.

What does this mean to you? This vaccine doesn't offer protection from all types of HPV — nor does it offer protection from other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Routine Pap tests to screen for cervical cancer remain important.

To reduce your risk of developing cervical cancer and STDs, practice safe sex. Limit your number of sexual partners. Unless you're in a monogamous relationship with a partner who's free of STDs, use a condom each time you have sex.

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