Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

*Research provided by the Kansas Association of Local Health Departments*

This week, in honor of HPV awareness day last Friday, we will be talking about Human Papillomavirus or HPV. The HPV vaccine is one of the only vaccines on the market today that has a shot at preventing cervical cancer in women.

*Since this is a sensitive topic that includes STIs and sex, I will tread lightly on research but will include additional reading if interested.*

***What is It?***

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is very common in the United States, with over 43 million infections in 2018. It typically spreads between sexually active teens and young adults. There are many different types of HPV, and the most common STI is usually harmless and clears on its own. However, some infections can cause severe genital warts or cervical cancer in women. HPV is spread through sexual interactions with someone who already has the virus (male or female). You do not need to have symptoms to spread the virus. Along with side effects such as cervical cancer, HPV can also cause throat cancer.

***History & Diagnosis***

While research is slim for the history of HPV, Harald zur Hausen discovered that HPV could cause cervical cancer in the 1980s. Because of this, both cervical cancer and HPV screenings were added to women’s wellness appointments worldwide to screen for disease prior to development. Once infected, the only treatment method is monitoring.

***Vaccine***

In 1986, Harald zur Hausen proposed the idea of an HPV vaccine to the public, however, it was not considered profitable enough for pharmaceutical companies to make. In 1990, the first widely used HPV vaccine was created at the University of Queensland in Australia. The creators used ‘virus like particles’ (VLPs) to create the vaccine. This method is highly recommended since it creates virus-like reactions in the body without introducing the actual virus. By 2007, after various clinical trials, Gardisil, was available to over 80 countries for the prevention of HPV. As of 2019, two additional vaccines have been added to the market.

***Campaign to End HPV & Reception***

While the HPV vaccine has been proven to be effective and safe, many parents refused to vaccinate their children due to their perception of it increasing sexual activity in teens. A recent study from Johns Hopkins University echoed those fears, along with concerns over safety and absence of recommendations from doctors. Throughout the last 10 years, various organizations including the CDC and HHS have held campaigns to increase awareness of HPV vaccination and it’s importance. While these campaigns are ongoing, HPV vaccination has increased considerably for the past 20 years.

***Personal Connections from Your Resident Millennial***

Like the Chickenpox vaccine, I was one of the first groups of people to receive the Gardasil HPV vaccine when I turned 13. My mom had HPV in her 20s and wanted to make sure I never had to deal with it. Unlike many parents during that time, my mom understood the importance of potentially preventing cervical cancer. I am very thankful that she did because we found out later that my family carries the BRCA 2 gene mutation – which puts me at a higher risk for cancer.

***What We Can Learn***

We can learn a lot from the HPV vaccine. Along with it preventing cervical cancer, we see the resistance that a lot of anti-vaccine groups promote. Because the HPV vaccine is deemed a “non-important” vaccine for many, it gets skipped at the best time for it to be given. HPV and cancer can become deadly diseases if they are not treated, and vaccines prevent a lot of the heartache and trouble in the future.

Sources & Further Reading

<https://www.cdc.gov/hpv/partners/partner-spotlight.html>

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/newsroom/news-releases/the-hpv-vaccine-why-parents-really-choose-to-refuse>

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<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_papillomavirus_infection>

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/pubs/pinkbook/hpv.html>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28964706/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/13/well/live/hpv-vaccine-children.html>