

Immunizations are a critical part of healthy living

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(Photo: Courtesy)

Every year around the world, more than 270,000 women die from cervical cancer. With more than 85 percent of these deaths in low- and middle-income countries, cervical cancer is the second-most common cancer in women worldwide.

The pap smear has been one of the most amazing public health interventions over the past 50 years in the U.S. and most developed countries, and its use has led to a steep decline in the incidence and deaths from cervical cancer.

However, weak health systems and limited numbers of trained providers have made screening in low- and middle-income countries difficult. Even in the U.S., more than 11,000 cases of cervical cancer were diagnosed in 2010.

Following development of the pap smear, the discovery of the link between the human papilloma virus (HPV) and cervical cancer has proven to be a major advancement in the prevention of this deadly disease. Almost all sexually active individuals will be infected with HPV at some point in their lives and some may be repeatedly infected.

The peak time for infection is shortly after becoming sexually active. The majority of HPV infections resolve spontaneously and do not cause symptoms or disease. However, persistent infections with specific types of HPV (usually types 16 and 18) may lead to precancerous lesions. If untreated, these lesions may progress to cervical cancer.

The HPV vaccine was introduced eight years ago, and the HPV rate among teenage girls in the United States has already dropped by 56 percent since then!

There is, however, still a lot of work to be done.

In Coachella Valley, only 13.6 percent of 18- to 33-year-old adults have had the HPV vaccine, according to a 2013 study from the Health Assessment Resource Center, a nonprofit organization that collects health data on people in eastern Riverside County. About 27 percent of women in this age range had received the vaccine compared to 4 percent of men, according to this study.

Nationwide, just 33 percent of girls ages 13 to 17 — and only 7 percent of boys in the same age group — have gotten all three doses of the vaccine. As a result, millions of people are still infected with HPV every year, and nearly all sexually active people will contract a form of HPV at some point in their lives.

Key facts about HPV and the HPV vaccine:

<PS.FRT7.187><TH>Seventy percent of cervical cancers worldwide are caused by only two types of HPV (16 and 18).

<PS.FRT7.187><TH>Our affiliate offers Gardasil — one of two FDA-approved HPV vaccines — in all of our health centers.

<PS.FRT7.187><TH>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends vaccination of girls and boys ages of 9–26.

<PS.FRT7.187><TH>Routine vaccination is a series of three shots over the course of six months.

Other immunizations that are important for women of reproductive age (both for general health and prior to pregnancy) include Hepatitis B, influenza, Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) Tetanus, Diphtheria and Pertussis (Tdap), and Varicella for those who have not had chicken pox.

This National Immunization Month, share this article with your friends and family, and spread the word about the importance of getting teens vaccinated against HPV!

Kelly Culwell is medical director for Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest, which operates clinics in Rancho Mirage and Coachella. For more information or to make an appointment, visit planned.org or call (888) 743-7526 (PLAN).

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