Get HPV Vaccination Back on Track, Experts Urge

Teens can receive the cancer-preventing HPV vaccine at the same time as their COVID-19 vaccine.

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While everyone is thinking about COVID-19 vaccines, it's important not to neglect routine vaccination for other conditions. The American Cancer Society, the American Society of Clinical Oncology, the American Association for Cancer Research and nearly 100 leading cancer centers nationwide are calling for urgent action to get human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination back on track.

Many health services have been put on the back burner during the COVID-19 crisis, including cancer screenings, non-urgent surgery, well-child visits and routine vaccinations for children and adolescents. While many immunizations are lagging, HPV vaccination has been especially affected—down 75% early in the pandemic and still 18% below previous years, according to the joint statement. Experts fear such delays could lead to serious health consequences down the road.

As children head back to school, the cancer organizations urged parents to get their adolescent children vaccinated as soon as possible and advised health care providers to identify and contact parents of adolescents who are due for vaccination.

"It is 'back to school' time in the U.S. and an ideal time to catch up on any missed vaccines for our children, including the cancer-preventing HPV vaccination, to keep children, schools and communities protected," said Heather Brandt, PhD, director of the HPV Cancer Prevention Program at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, who coordinated the joint statement.

COVID-19 vaccination offers a good opportunity to catch up on other vaccines. The Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine is authorized for adolescents ages 12 to 15 and is fully approved for people ages 16 or older. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that other vaccines—including the HPV vaccine—can be administered at same time as COVID-19 vaccination.

Human papillomavirus is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections, and most people acquire some of the more than 150 known types of the virus soon after they become sexually active. HPV triggers abnormal cell growth that can lead to precancerous cell changes. If

left undetected and untreated, it can progress to cervical cancer, anal cancer, oral cancer and other malignancies.

The Gardasil 9 vaccine protects against nine different HPV types, including the two main cancer-causing types (16 and 18). HPV vaccines have been shown to prevent cancer, but only about half of adolescents are fully vaccinated, according CDC data from 2019.

The CDC recommends the HPV vaccine for girls and boys at ages 11 or 12, but it can be given as early as age 9, with catch-up vaccination for those up to age 26. The Food and Drug Administration has approved Gardasil 9 for women and men up to age 45; the CDC advises that people between 27 and 45 should discuss with their health care providers whether they might still benefit.

Click here for more news about HPV vaccines.

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