

Taking “A Shot” at Cervical Cancer

If you have a preteen or teenage daughter, one vaccination you may want to consider at her next checkup is the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine.

A virus that is easily spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity, HPV is the leading cause of cervical cancer in women. About 20 million people are currently infected with HPV in the United States, mostly young people in their late teens and early 20s. And because it often has no symptoms, many people do not know they have the disease. But with one series of shots, you can help protect your daughter against HPV and significantly reduce her risk of developing cervical cancer.

“There are more than 100 types of HPV, and about 40 of these can cause genital warts and precancerous changes,” explains Takashi Hirata, MD, medical director of Medical Associates of Davie at Hillside. “Some parents understand that the HPV vaccine is for STD prevention, but they don’t realize that it is also a cancer-prevention vaccine. We’d like to see every pre-teen have this safe and effective vaccination to eliminate these risks.”

Two vaccines, Cervarix and Gardasil, are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to guard against the HPV strains that can cause cervical cancer, and both have been recommended for girls and women ages 9-26. The vaccination is given as a series of three shots

over a six-month period, and your daughter should receive all three shots to ensure the vaccine will be effective. The most common side effect is soreness or reddening of the skin where the shot is given.

But the HPV vaccine isn’t just for women. Gardasil, which has been shown to also protect against the HPV types that cause most genital warts, is also approved for males ages 9-26.

“The best time to get the HPV vaccine is at age 11 or 12, when most children are getting other vaccinations,” Dr. Hirata says. “These shots should be given before a person is sexually active for their full effectiveness, but we still recommend that people who are sexually active get the vaccine, too. Even if you have had an abnormal Pap smear or other concern that may be related to HPV, this vaccine may protect you from other, different types of HPV.”

