

Adolescence & Health

WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON?

Is HPV Vaccination Really About Adolescent Health?

- In the U.S. targeted ages for vaccination are 11-12 years (pre-adolescence)
- Increasing calls for administration of 1st dose at age 9 or 10 (older childhood)
- It is a vaccine that should be administered to pre-adolescents and older children in order to prevent diseases that typically occur in adulthood
- There is now a consensus in the U.S. that we should characterize HPV vaccination as cancer prevention, and not as prevention of a sexually transmitted infection
- By emphasizing HPV vaccine as uniquely adolescent we may have inadvertently stigmatized the vaccine

On the other hand...

- HPV vaccine prevents infections that most typically occur in the adolescent and young adult years, even if the most serious consequences do not appear until later
- HPV vaccination can be considered part of the broader reproductive health needs of adolescents, which include:
 - Confidential reproductive health care
 - Access to safe and effective contraception
 - Diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- At a broader level we need to continue to work to destigmatize STIs – it should matter less how something is transmitted, and more how prevalent and serious the consequences are – and how effectively and safely we can prevent and treat

And yet...

- Many health care providers (HCPs) who see adolescents are uncomfortable talking about adolescent reproductive health*
 - “We found that one-third of all adolescents had annual visits without any mention of sexuality issues; when sexuality talk occurred, it was brief”
- When HCPs think of HPV vaccination as an adolescent vaccine they may tend to delay from 11 or 12 years until older ages. Examples of health care provider comments to parents of 11-12 years olds:**
 - “She’s not at an age where she is going to be having any risk factors.”
 - “But as long as it’s before he’s sexually active, which he better not be, because then he’d have to answer to his pediatrician and his mama.”
 - “Uh, the HPV which is the Gardasil, you absolutely do not need to do at this age. There is no urgency in a twelve year old to do it (laughs).”

* Alexander et al. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 2014.

**Sturm et al. *J Adolesc Health*. In press.

In my ideal world...

- The first dose of HPV vaccine would be administered at age 9 or 10
- The second dose would be administered as part of the U.S. 11-12 year old vaccine platform:
 - Tdap booster
 - HPV vaccine
 - MenACWY
 - Seasonal influenza vaccine
- HCPs who care for adolescents would feel comfortable talking with patients and their parents about all of their health care needs – prevention and harm reduction, reproductive health, mental health, establishing healthy relationships, etc.