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The Price of HPV

By Tricia Musslewhite

CERVICAL CANCER once claimed the lives of more American women than any other type of cancer. But over the last 40 years, widespread cervical cancer screening, using the Pap test, and treatment of abnormal precancerous cells have greatly reduced deaths due to cervical cancer in the United States. The American Cancer Society estimated 11,000 women would be diagnosed with cervical cancer and approximately 3,600 would die from the disease in 2007. Now, a new vaccine has the potential to prevent the two types of viruses that can lead to cervical cancer from ever taking hold, saving thousands of lives and billions of dollars.

If you have ever had a wart on your hand, you have had a human papillomavirus (HPV). There are almost 100 types of HPV. Approximately 40 are known to infect the genital tract and can be spread through sexual contact, making HPV the most common

sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. Approximately 20 million people are currently infected with HPV and an additional 6.2 million acquire new infections each year. HPV is most common in young people who are in their late teens and early twenties.

A hand wart is considered low risk based on its cancer-causing potential. Recent studies suggest two HPV strains, 16 and 18, are high-risk types and are responsible for 70 percent of cervical cancers. One study found HPV DNA in 99.7 percent of cervical cancer specimens. Two other low-risk types, strains 6 and 11, are responsible for 90 percent of genital warts in women and men. The new HPV vaccine can prevent these four strains. For more information about the HPV vaccine and the recommendation to immunize 11- and 12-year-old girls, read this month's Family Department, "A Shot at Preventing Cancer."

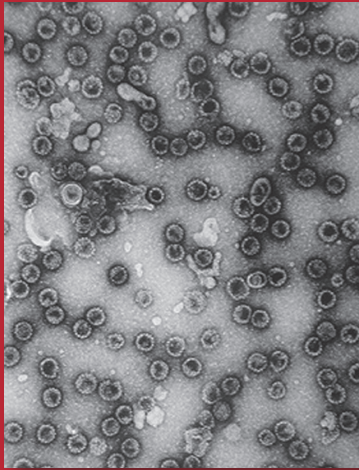
A COSTLY VIRUS

Direct costs associated with treatment of HPV-related medical conditions are difficult to determine because many HPV infections go undetected and clear up on their own without medical treatment. That hand wart may have cost you a trip to the drug store. At most, it required a doctor's visit to have it removed.

But, when HPV in the genital tract doesn't go away and results in genital warts, abnormal cells in the lining of the cervix or cervical cancer the costs can add up. The screening and treatment costs associated with these conditions may include Pap tests – HPV is the leading cause of abnormal Pap smear results – HPV-type testing, laser or cryotherapy for the removal of warts and treatment of precancerous cells or invasive cervical cancer.

A 2004 study published in *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* compared the direct medical costs of STDs among American 15- to 24-year-olds. The study demonstrated that estimated medical costs of HPV infection are similar to human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The study found that the estimated medical costs of 15,000 new cases of HIV in 2000 would cost \$3 billion while 4.6 million new cases of HPV in 2000 would cost \$2.9 billion. HPV also can take a toll on a patient's quality of life. Areas that are impacted by HPV include emotional, social and sexual functioning.

Exact prevalence data on HPV in Texas is not available because HPV is not a reportable STD. Using the national economic model used by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),



HPV cells

What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a **common virus** that affects both females and males. Most types of HPV are harmless, do not cause any symptoms and go away on their own. However, there are **a few types of HPV that could lead to serious diseases like cervical cancer.**

How common is HPV?

Of the estimated 6 million new cases of approximately 30 types of genital HPV in the U.S. every year, **74 percent occur in 15-to 24-year-olds.** By the age of 50, **8 out of every 10** women will have had HPV.

How common is cervical cancer?

Approximately **11,000 new cases** of cervical cancer were diagnosed in the U.S. in 2007.

Who develops cervical cancer?

About half of all females diagnosed with cervical cancer are between **35 and 55 years old.** These women were most likely **exposed in their late teens or early 20s** to a high-risk type of HPV.

from www.gardasil.com

the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) estimates it would cost \$123.5 million per year to treat HPV-related medical conditions in Texas. According to State Representative Ken Paxton, R-McKinney, the total includes \$15.2 million for treating men and women for genital warts, \$79.1 million for required follow-up of abnormal Pap test results and \$29.1 million for treatment of cervical cancer. These estimates are based on 2005 cost projections for the general Texas population.

PREVENTION IS PRICELESS

Last year when Texas Governor Rick Perry tried to mandate that sixth-grade girls be vaccinated for HPV to enter public school, many legislators argued that the decision is a private matter that should be decided within the family. The Texas legislature overturned the governor's order.

Pharmaceutical giant, Merck & Co., Inc., ran a campaign to educate parents about Gardasil, the HPV vaccination that is licensed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), suggesting that, if vaccinated, your daughter could become one less life affected by cervical cancer. In the Frisco Independent School District (FISD) there are approximately 5,826 middle school students as of November 1, 2007. If half are girls, then approximately 2,913 fewer lives are susceptible to future illness and economic burden if vaccinated. Studies to determine if boys should also be vaccinated are in progress.

Parents who decide to voluntarily vaccinate their daughters against HPV should check with their child's physician regarding vaccine availability and with their insurance company regarding coverage. Most health insurance carriers cover the vaccine, but health plans and physician office costs vary. Frisco pediatrician Kathleen Stokes, M.D., says Gardasil is the most expensive vaccine, costing her practice \$120 per dose or \$360 for the three-shot series. When you consider, according to the American Cancer Society, the cost of treating cervical disease each year in this country is approximately \$3.5 billion dollars, in addition to the anxiety and loss of productivity associated with diagnosis and treatment, the benefits outweigh

the cost. "Parents need to know the enormity of HPV," says Dr. Stokes. "We can take a big chunk out of the cancer groups."

The federal Vaccines for Children (VFC) Program provides coverage for many who do not have private health insurance. Free vaccines are available to children and adolescents who are under 19, uninsured or underinsured, Medicaid-eligible, American Indian or Alaska Native. According to Rep. Paxton, there are 3,400 clinic sites participating in the Texas Vaccines for Children Program. Public health clinics in Texas are authorized to vaccinate any female child or adolescent who presents for services who is nine through 18 years of age. Information on how to find the nearest public health clinic is available by calling 800.252.9152.

Merck has a patient assistance program for vaccines, which makes available at no cost, Gardasil and other Merck vaccines indicated for use in individuals ages 19 and older who are uninsured and unable to afford vaccines. Gardasil is licensed for use in women up to 26 years old.

SCREENING SAVES

Approximately half of all cervical cancers occur in women who have never been screened. Screening programs have been shown to effectively reduce the risk of cervical cancer and its associated costs.

Vaccination against HPV will not reduce the need for routine Pap tests. One reason is the current vaccine does not provide protection against all types of HPV that cause cervical cancer. Also, women may not receive the full benefits of the vaccine if they do not complete the series or if they receive the vaccine after they have already been exposed to HPV.

Studies show there is a considerable healthcare burden associated with HPV-related conditions. Cancer screening is reducing medical costs and saving lives. The advent of a vaccine that can protect against the HPV infections that cause 70 percent of cervical cancers can substantially reduce the economic and social burden of cervical cancer – can prevent cervical cancer. You can't put a price on that.

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