

HPV vaccine: A shot that can protect your child from cancer

By Natalie McGill

As a parent or guardian, you're responsible for making sure your children receive a long list of vaccinations that will keep them healthy for years to come.

While you continue to keep track of recommended shots for your children, there's a vaccine you should make sure is on your list that probably wasn't around when you were a child: the human papillomavirus vaccine. The vaccine is important because it can protect your child from certain cancers.

There are more than 40 HPV types and about 79 million people in the U.S. are currently infected with the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

HPV can infect the mouth, throat and genitals of both males and females, CDC says. People can get HPV through sexual activity. While parents might not like to think about their kids growing up and having sex, sexual activity is a common part of adult life. Getting the vaccine while your children are young can protect them when they are older.

"HPV is a very common infection in the

U.S. and almost everyone will be exposed to it or acquire it at some point," says Lauri Markowitz, MD, a medical epidemiologist with CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention. "Some of those infections do go on and cause a variety of cancers."

The HPV vaccine, a series of three shots, is recommended for girls and boys as early as age 11 or 12, according to CDC.

But what if your child is older? Luckily, teen girls and young women can still get the vaccine through age 26 if they didn't get vaccinated at an earlier age or finish all three shots. For males, teen boys and young men can get vaccinated through age 21. Men who have had sex with other men, as well as men whose immune systems are compromised, can get vaccinated through age 26 if they didn't get vaccinated at an early age, CDC says.

However, it's recommended that you get your children vaccinated as preteens. Very little exposure to the virus occurs before age 13 and the vaccine will provide the most protection if given before exposure, Markowitz says. According to CDC, the preteen years are when the vaccine will give



your child the most antibodies — proteins that will help get rid of an infection — to tackle HPV.

Parents should make sure to get all three shots over a six-month period. If your child can't complete the shots within that time, make sure to complete the remaining shots regardless of how much time has passed, according to CDC.

All HPV vaccines protect against the types of HPV that cause most cervical cancer and other related cancers.

Annually, cancers caused by HPV affect about 17,500 women and 9,300 men in the U.S., according to CDC. Unfortunately, cancers caused by HPV can be fatal.

Let your children know that HPV is a common virus and that the vaccine can protect them in the future against certain cancers, Markowitz says. Protection offered by the HPV vaccine lasts at least eight to 10 years and will likely last much longer.

If you want to vaccinate your child against HPV but can't afford it, there's help. CDC's Vaccines for Children program provides vaccines for children age 18 and younger who lack health insurance, are eligible for Medicaid or meet other criteria.

Talk to your child's doctor to find out how to get the vaccine and ask about what cancers it will protect against as well as any other concerns you have.

"As with all vaccines, parents may have concerns about safety," Markowitz says. "HPV vaccines have been shown to have a very good safety record. Some parents may have been concerned that having their child vaccinated would lead to increased sexual activity; however, the research shows that's not the case."

>> For more tips on vaccination and HPV, visit www.cdc.gov/hpv/vaccine

Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Father and son by Feristockphoto; girl, Christopher Futcher; vial, Dima2001

5 things parents need to know about HPV vaccination

- 1 The HPV vaccine can prevent certain types of cancer.
- 2 The HPV vaccine is for both girls and boys.
- 3 It's best to get vaccinated with the HPV vaccine while young.
- 4 The HPV vaccine is recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- 5 The HPV vaccine is available now from your doctor.

