Mothers key to college-age women receiving HPV vaccine

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Even after young women reach adulthood, their mothers can play a key role in convincing them to receive the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, new research suggests.

A study found that college-aged women were more likely to say they had received the HPV vaccine if they had talked to their mother about it.

"Mothers talking to their daughters were an important factor in whether young women were vaccinated," said Janice Krieger, lead author of the study and assistant professor of communication at Ohio State University.

"It is an encouraging finding, because it shows that communication between mothers and daughters can be very helpful, even if it may be difficult sometimes."

Many mothers and daughters may be uncomfortable talking about the HPV vaccine, because it is designed to prevent the spread of a sexually-transmitted virus, Krieger said.

But regardless of the difficulty in talking about it, the vaccine is important because a persistent HPV infection may cause cancer. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection and will infect about half of sexually active people in the United States during their lifetimes.

The study appears in the January 2011 issue of the journal *Human Communication Research*.

The exploratory research involved 182 mother-daughter pairs. All of the daughters were college students, with an average age of 20.

The daughters mailed a questionnaire about the HPV vaccine to their mothers, and completed a similar questionnaire for themselves.

Overall, 137 of the mother-daughter pairs had talked about the HPV vaccine, and 45 pairs reporting not discussing the vaccine.

Results showed that the key for daughters getting the vaccine was having mothers who discussed the HPV vaccine with their daughter and who reported believing that the vaccine was safe and effective in preventing HPV-related diseases.

Fears about susceptibility to HPV and about the severity of HPV-caused illness -- on the parts of mothers or daughters -- were not related to whether they talked about the issue.

"Fear does not seem to be the motivator," Krieger said. "It really depends on the mothers believing that the HPV vaccine is safe and effective and that they have the ability to discuss this topic with their daughters."

The findings don't show what was discussed about the HPV vaccine, but Krieger suspects that the cost of the vaccine may be one topic, since costs have been reported to range from $360 to $600 for the 3-shot series. This is one reason why it is important to get mothers involved, even after their daughters reach adulthood.

"Public health officials have concentrated on convincing women over 18 to get the vaccinations themselves, but that may not be the best way to reach them," Krieger said.

"Most women in early adulthood don't have a lot of extra money, and even if they do, a preventive vaccine like the HPV vaccine may not be high on their list of things to buy."

That may be one reason that few young women are vaccinated, she said.

One recent study found that just one-third of teens and young women who start the three-dose vaccine series actually finish, and almost three-quarters don't start it at all.

The study findings suggest that encouraging mothers and daughters to talk about the HPV vaccine, even if it may seem uncomfortable, is an important step in cancer prevention.

"Mothers may be afraid to bring up the topic, but it doesn't have to be a conversation focused on sex. Mothers can talk about how the HPV vaccine is safe and effective and that it prevents cancer," Krieger said. "If parents have the ability to pay for the vaccine, that could really help, as well."

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