Study finds girls aware of HPV vaccine's benefits

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Contrary to concerns that the human papillomavirus vaccine might promote promiscuity, a national survey of girls and young women found that the majority of respondents did not believe the HPV vaccine protected them against other sexually transmitted infections.

The study, conducted by University of Illinois at Chicago and University of Chicago researchers, appears online and in the November issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

The findings are reassuring in that girls and young women did not think that the vaccine provided benefits beyond protecting them from HPV, said Dr. Rachel Caskey, assistant professor of pediatrics and general internal medicine at UIC and lead author of the study. "We also found that they did not think that they could stop cervical cancer screening, or pap smears, which is critical."

Researchers used a national sample, representative of the U.S. population, to conduct an online survey of more than 1,000 females ages 13 to 26.

The data provide some of the first nationally representative estimates of both adolescents' and young women's adoption of the HPV vaccine, barriers to vaccination, and sources of information about HPV and the HPV vaccine, according to the researchers.

Knowledge about the HPV virus itself ran the gamut, said Caskey. Some

people knew absolutely nothing and a few people were moderately informed. Knowledge about the HPV vaccine, however, was better.

"Messages about the vaccine are getting across, though they are not including messages about the virus itself," said Caskey.

The HPV vaccine is likely to provide the greatest benefit to those who receive it prior to HPV exposure, but nearly 30 percent of the unvaccinated girls reported not getting the vaccine because they were not currently sexually active.

The study found that the respondents' primary source of information about the HPV vaccine was advertisements for the vaccine, marketed as Gardasil (61 percent), healthcare providers (35 percent) and family members (31 percent).

It is probably ideal when family and doctors can be the primary providers of information, said Caskey, but that is not realistic today due to the influence of the media.

"Many girls are realizing, 'this is a vaccine I should get, it prevents cervical cancer, it doesn't protect me from other things, but I don't really know much about the virus,'" said Caskey.

The researchers also found that cost was not a barrier for many participants, particularly younger girls.

When asked about other participatory guidance topics, such as sex, alcohol, and drugs, less than half of the participants said their doctor ever talked to them about these issues.

Arguably, said Caskey, these issues should be the main topic of conversation during a regular visit to a healthcare provider for girls and

young women.

Consistent with other studies about vaccine adoption, the researchers found that 30 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds and 9 percent of 18- to 26-year-olds reported receiving at least one HPV injection.

Source: University of Illinois at Chicago (news : web)

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