HPV vaccination reduces the risk of infection even after a previous case of the disease

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The vaccination against human papillomavirus (HPV) reduces the risk of a renewed HPV-associated illness in patients who have already had diseases as a consequence of an HPV infection. That is the result of a study being led by Elmar Joura from the University Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the MedUni Vienna and which has now been published in the *British Medical Journal*. It had previously been the view that the HPV vaccination had a purely preventative effect and was also only effective in young women and men.

In Austria up to 500 women are diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer each year. HP viruses are responsible for this in more than 90 percent of cases. According to Statistik Austria, around 150 to 180 women die

from the condition every year. According to figures from the World Health Organization (WHO) for Austria, these numbers are even higher - with 600 people contracting the illness and around 300 dying from it every year.

In Austria, around 6,000 women are admitted to hospitals year after year because the preliminary stages of cervical cancer have to be treated and removed. In addition, according to Joura, there are around 30,000 “abnormal smears” and around 15,000 people suffer from genital warts, which are also caused by HP viruses. This affects men too. Two out of three people will come into contact with HP viruses at some time during their life. A single vaccination can protect people from these diseases.

Vaccination reduces the risk of a renewed disease by two thirds

In the current study of 17,000 women between the ages of 16 and 26, the team of researchers led by Joura determined that the HPV vaccination also has an effect on people who have already previously had this disease, and who generally have a much greater risk of subsequently contracting an HPV-associated disease again. Joura says: “We have been able to show that the risk of a renewed disease is reduced by two thirds with this vaccination.”

The effect of HPV is insidious, as Ursula Wiedermann-Schmidt, Head of the Institute of Specific Prophylaxis and Tropical Medicine at the MedUni Vienna, explains: “An infection with HPV initially progresses slowly, undiscovered and without any symptoms of illness, until it finally causes cancer.” The vaccination protects people from the disease, and it is not only advisable for young people. Says Joura: “There is data which proves the efficiency of the vaccination in people even up to the age of 45. Therefore vaccination is to be recommended for everyone up to the

age of 45. It provides protection not only from cervical cancer but also from other types of cancer, such as anal carcinoma. This protection applies to men and women equally." According to Joura it would be desirable that this vaccination is not only included in the Austrian vaccination schedule, but also in the child vaccination schedule and therefore be financed by public funds. There has already been a recommendation from Austria's Supreme Health Council (Oberster Sanitätsrat) in place for this since 2007.

More information: "Effect of the human papillomavirus (HPV) quadrivalent vaccine in a subgroup of women with cervical and vulvar disease: retrospective pooled analysis of trial data." E. Joura; et al. *BMJ* 2012; 344 doi: 10.1136/bmj.e1401

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