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HPV VACCINES AND PAP SMEARS PREVENT CERVICAL CANCER

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Cervical cancer is preventable with HPV vaccinations that help prevent the disease and Pap screens that test for it. And yet approximately 13,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with the disease each year, and more than 4,000 die of cervical cancer in the same time frame.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (cdc.gov) recommends that all girls and boys get the vaccination to prevent HPV—or human papillomavirus—at the age of 11 or 12. The vaccine helps prevent most strains of HPV that can lead to not only cervical cancer but also anal cancer.

January is Cervical Health Awareness Month and the Monongalia County Health Department’s Clinical Services program can help area girls and women protect their cervical health with both HPV vaccinations and Pap tests.

HPV is a very common virus, according to the CDC. Nearly 80 million people—about one in four—are currently infected in the United States. About 14 million people, including teens, become infected with HPV each year.

That’s why it is important for both girls and boys to get the HPV vaccine at the age of 11 or 12, consisting of two shots that would be given six to 12 months apart. Once a child is older than 14 years old, the dose rises to three shots. It is preferable to get the HPV vaccine before becoming sexually active; however, it can be given to individuals up to 26 years old.

“The HPV vaccine can significantly lower the risk of HPV infection and cervical cancer,” said Jennifer Goldcamp, the director of nursing for MCHD Clinical Services. “The best time for vaccination is during the preteen years.”
Every year in the United States, HPV causes 30,700 cancers in men and women. HPV vaccination can prevent most of the cancers—about 28,000—from occurring.

Most people with HPV never develop symptoms or health problems. Most HPV infections—nine out of 10—go away by themselves within two years. But some HPV infections will last longer and can cause certain cancers and other diseases. HPV infection can cause:

- cancers of the cervix, vagina and vulva in women;
- cancers of the penis in men; and
- cancers of the anus and back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils (oropharynx), in both women and men.

Once a woman turns 21 and through the age of at least 65, she should begin getting Pap tests, which screens for cervical cancer (although not for ovarian, uterine, vaginal or vulvar cancers). Generally, if results are normal, the test should be repeated every three years unless otherwise indicated by a physician.

Early on, cervical cancer might not cause any symptoms, which makes testing very important. In the latter stages of the disease, a woman might experience bleeding or discharge that is not her period.

The Monongalia County Health Department is a participant in the West Virginia Breast and Cervical Cancer Screening Program. The WVBCCSP provides clinical breast examinations, mammograms and Pap tests for eligible women, as well as diagnostic testing for women whose screening outcome is abnormal. The program helps women who are uninsured or underinsured who meet income guidelines.

Other ways to lower the risk of cervical cancer is to avoid using tobacco products, use condoms during sex and limit the number of sexual partners.

To make an appointment for an HPV vaccination or a Pap test at MCHD Clinical Services (www.monchd.org), call 304-598-5119.

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