

Give Love not HPV



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Human papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common sexually transmitted viruses among both males and females, with estimates that reach up to 75% of sexually active people being infected with HPV during their life time at least once. HPV is most commonly transmitted during vaginal or anal sex; however penetrative sex is not required for transmission, as skin to skin genital contact is more than enough to get infected. Using condoms may limit the transmission of HPV, but unfortunately it is not enough to protect against transmitting the virus. Most HPV infections are usually asymptomatic or subclinical, meaning that it is not necessary to have any symptoms, and even if any symptoms show up, they will not be before weeks, or sometimes months after getting infected. However, despite that, HPV is well known to be the cause of multiple major health diseases and conditions, including but not limited to: cervical cancer (HPV causes virtually almost 100% of cervical cancer cases), vulvar cancer and vaginal cancer in females, anal cancer and oropharyngeal cancer in males, as well as anogenital warts in both males and females. As a matter of fact, of the estimated 12.7 million new cancers worldwide each year in males and females, 610,000 (~5%) are attributable to HPV, and if you look at the available local data in Lebanon, cervical cancer is ranked as the second most common cancer amongst women in Lebanon. HPV infection clears on its own most of the time, however this is never guaranteed. When a female is infected with certain types of HPV, and the virus doesn't go away on its own, abnormal cells can develop on the cervix causing pre-cancer. If pre-cancer is not diagnosed and treated, cervical cancer may then develop. Cervical cancer screening with

Pap smear and /or HPV testing which is recommended beginning at age 21 years and continuing through age 65 years, may attempt to early diagnose HPV related pre-cancer, but it does not prevent HPV infections. Unfortunately, most cases of cervical cancer present in advanced stages where treatment is not without complications, or risk-free, and a large number of patients die of the disease. This also applies to the other types of cancers that are caused by HPV. Although HPV-related cancers usually don't develop until later in life, many people who develop HPV-related cancers may have been exposed to cancer-causing HPV types in their teens and 20s. This highly emphasizes the role of primary prevention of HPV infections.

In addition to the various cancers caused by HPV, HPV also causes anogenital warts, which may not pose a serious threat to the lives of the patients same as cancer, however they have a big impact on patient's lives. The psychological pressure, combined with the uncomfortableness and the painful treatment of genital warts, which might not be permanently curing as the tendency for warts to recur within the first 3 months is very high, make anogenital warts a disease with a high burden.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) recommends routine HPV vaccination at age 11 or 12 years for both girls (bivalent, quadrivalent or 9 valent vaccine) and boys (quadrivalent or 9 valent vaccine). The vaccination series can be started beginning at age of 9 years, until the age of 26 for both males and females, with a 2 dose regimen between the ages 9 and 14 and 3 dose regimen between 15 and 26. HPV vaccines have a proven safety profile, and they are FDA approved.

Unfortunately, vaccination rates against HPV are very low in Lebanon. This can be attributed to the lack of awareness about HPV and its related diseases among patients, as well as physicians. Hence I would like to use the day of March 4, HPV awareness day, as an opportunity to try to increase the awareness about this disease, to encourage vaccinators to vaccinate their patients, and to encourage the public to seek their doctors in order to get vaccinated, hoping to reach a time where HPV and its related cancers and diseases are fully eradicated.



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