



INSIGHTS

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Weighing in on Gardasil

There are differing points of view with respect to the Ontario government's plan to offer a free vaccine that could help prevent cervical cancer in young women.

Gardasil, the vaccine that will be administered at a cost of \$117 million over three years, prevents two strains of human papillomavirus, a common sexually transmitted infection that is responsible for 70 per cent of cervical cancers.

The HPV vaccine protects against infection by four strains of human papillomavirus, two of which are responsible for 70 per cent of cervical cancers. (The other two strains in the vaccine protect against genital warts.)

The vaccination program has wide-ranging support that comes from scientists, medical specialists and groups like the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and Cancer Care Ontario. The Federal government also backs the use of Gardasil and established a \$300 million national vaccination fund in its last budget. The Ontario program utilizes this money.

However, there is one question that the Ontario HPV program, which administers Gardasil in three doses over six months, should be raising: Why is it necessary to administer the vaccine in schools?

While the program is voluntary and will be carried out with consent forms and information that will be provided to parents ahead of time, there's likely to be peer pressure on girls whose parents choose not to vaccinate them at that time, or at all.

There are good reasons for this. Some parents might still have questions about HPV when it comes to vaccination time. An article published recently in the electronic edition of the Canadian Medical Association Journal said that it's too early for Canada to immunize all girls and women. There will be parents whose own moral beliefs are in conflict with the medical necessity of the vaccine.

Lead author Abby Lippman, chair of the Canadian Women's Health Network board and a professor in the department of epidemiology, biostatistics and occupational health at Montreal's McGill University, says there are questions about how long the vaccine will be effective. The vaccine may also create a false

sense of security, says Lippman, who fears that women who have been vaccinated may be less vigilant about safe sex and getting regular Pap tests.

HPV is highly communicable. Both men and women are carriers. To eradicate the disease, men will eventually need to be vaccinated. Studies are being conducted now to determine the efficacy of vaccinating boys with the current vaccine.

Human papilloma virus is the most common sexually transmitted disease and is spread by skin to skin contact. In some cases it can develop into cervical cancer, which in Canada is diagnosed in 1400 women a year. More than 400 die, 170 of them here in Ontario.

The evidence suggests that Gardasil can be effective and beneficial. It triggers an antibody response that protects vaccine recipients from becoming infected with the HPV types represented in the vaccine.

That being said, every parent will need to make the vaccination decision in consultation with their child and family doctor after examining the facts and weighing those against their own set of beliefs - whether they be medical, moral or religious.

Schools should serve as the conduit to distribute information. However, it would also make sense for the provincial government to encourage the administration of the vaccine in doctor's offices and clinic settings.

The benefit would go way beyond Gardasil. It would introduce young women to both the importance of regular medical checkups, and the importance of developing a relationship with a professional that could quite possibly lead to better overall health.

Until next time...

Did You Know?

Registered Dietitians are now covered under your RWAM group plan.



RWAM will pay up to \$150/calendar year for the Nutritional Counselling benefit, whether services are covered by an Registered Nutritional Consulting Practitioner or a Registered Dietician.

FLU Shot | Your best shot for avoiding influenza

Flu is a respiratory infection caused by a number of viruses. The viruses pass through the air and enter your body through your nose or mouth. Between 5% and 20% of people get the flu each year. The flu can be serious or even deadly for elderly people, newborn babies and people with certain chronic illnesses.

Symptoms of the flu come on suddenly and are worse than those of the common cold. They may include:

- | Body or muscle aches
- | Fever
- | Chills
- | Headache
- | Cough
- | Sore throat

Is it a cold or the flu? Colds rarely cause a fever or headaches. Flu almost never causes an upset stomach. And "stomach flu" isn't really flu at all, but gastroenteritis.

The main way to keep from getting the flu is to get a yearly flu vaccine. If you get the flu, your health care provider may prescribe medicine to help your body fight the infection and lessen symptoms.

Here are the answers to common questions about the flu and flu shots.

What kind of protection does the flu vaccine offer?

A flu shot is between 70 percent and 90 percent effective in warding off illness, depending on the length and intensity of a given flu season and your overall health. In a few cases, people who get a flu shot may still get the flu, but they'll get a much less virulent form of the illness and, more importantly, they'll have a decreased risk of flu-related complications - especially pneumonia, heart attack, stroke and death - to which older adults are especially vulnerable.

Why do I need to get vaccinated every year?

You need an annual flu shot because the vaccine changes from year to year. The flu vaccine you got last year wasn't designed to fight the virus strains in circulation this season, or next.

Influenza viruses mutate so quickly that they can render one season's vaccine ineffective by the next season. A flu shot contains an inactivated vaccine (Fluzone) made of killed virus. The shot is usually given in the arm. Because the viruses in the vaccine are killed (inactivated), the shot won't cause you to get the flu, but it will enable your body to develop the antibodies necessary to ward off influenza viruses. You may have a slight reaction to the shot, such as soreness at the injection site, mild muscle ache or fever. Reactions usually last one to two days and are more likely to occur in children who have never been exposed to the flu virus.

Who should get the flu vaccine?

Most people who want to reduce the risk of having influenza can get a flu shot. Physicians recommend the flu vaccine in particular if you:

- | Are pregnant
- | Are 50 years old or older
- | Have a chronic medical condition
- | Are a child care worker or health care worker or live with or care for someone at high risk of complications from the flu

Who shouldn't get the flu shot?

- | Those who have had an allergic reaction to the vaccine in the past.
- | Those who are allergic to eggs.
- | Anyone who developed Guillain-Barre syndrome, a serious autoimmune disease affecting the nerves outside the brain and spinal cord, within six weeks of receiving the vaccine in the past. People who have experienced Guillain-Barre after the flu vaccine are at higher risk than are others of developing it again.
- | Have a fever. Wait until your symptoms improve before getting vaccinated.



Why do children need two doses of the flu vaccine?

Children younger than 9 years old require two doses of the flu vaccine if it's the first time they've been vaccinated for influenza. That's because children don't develop an adequate antibody level the first time they get the vaccine. Antibodies help fight the virus if it enters your child's system. If a flu vaccine shortage were to occur and your child couldn't get two doses of vaccine, one dose might still offer some protection.

Can I prevent the flu if I don't get a flu shot?

With or without a flu shot, you can take steps to help protect yourself from the flu and other viruses.

- | Practice good hygiene - good hygiene remains your primary defense against contagious illnesses.
- | Wash your hands thoroughly and often with soap and water or an alcohol-based sanitizer.
- | Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth whenever possible.
- | Avoid crowds when the flu is most prevalent in your area.
- | Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.

What should I do if I get the flu?

First of all, don't go to work or school - you'll risk spreading this contagious disease to others.

To relieve your symptoms:

- | Drink plenty of fluids
- | Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others) for aches and pains.
- | Rest
- | Avoid alcohol and tobacco

Keeping all of the above information in mind, it's also important to eat healthy and get some daily activity to help keep your immune system in top form.

Source: MayoClinic.com