HPV-Vaccinated Women May Require Fewer Cervical Cancer Screenings

Women who received the HPV vaccine before age 30 could receive only two or three cervical cancer screenings over their lifetime.

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Women vaccinated against human papillomavirus (HPV) at a young age may need only two or three screenings for cervical cancer—which can be caused by HPV—over the course of their lifetimes, according to a new study co-authored by researchers at Norway's University of Oslo and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

The study was published February 3 in the Annals of Internal Medicine. Co-authors included members of Harvard Chan School's Center for Health Decision Science: Stephen Sy, Allison Portnoy, Jane Kim, and Emily Burger.

The American Cancer Society recommends that women and other individuals with a cervix be screened for cervical cancer every three to five years. These guidelines do not consider whether a patient was vaccinated against HPV, however. The vaccine has been shown to reduce the risk of cervical cancer by more than 90%.

The researchers aimed to find out if the currently recommended screening frequency is still best practice for preventing cervical cancer, given the high uptake of the HPV vaccine. To do so, they used government health data from Norway to model the health impacts and cost-effectiveness of making cervical cancer screenings less frequent among HPV-vaccinated women ages 12 to 30.

The study found that women who received the HPV vaccine before age 30 could safely receive only two or three cervical cancer screenings over the course of their lifetimes, and the younger they are when vaccinated, the longer they can go between screenings. Those vaccinated between ages 25 and 30 could be screened every 10 years; those vaccinated between ages 19 and 21 could be screened every 20 years, starting at age 25; and those vaccinated before age 19 could be screened every 25 years.

The screening cadences outlined in the new study are safe for health while also reducing health care costs and unnecessary procedures, according to the researchers. They added, however, that more research is needed before clinicians begin reducing screenings.

“We are trying to build the evidence around the case for changing the guidelines for vaccinated women,” Kim said in a February 3

Medscape article about the study.

The researchers also emphasized that while overarching guidelines could be changed, the choice to be screened for cervical cancer is an individual one, and should also take into account a patient’s unique risk factors, such as a weakened immune system or prior history of abnormal screenings or cervical cancer.

Read the study: Optimizing Cervical Cancer Screening by Age at Vaccination for Human Papillomavirus: Health and Resource Implications

Read the Medscape article: HPV-Vaccinated Women May Only Need Two Cervical Cancer Screenings in Lifetime

Read a Healthline article about the study: Fewer Cervical Cancer Screenings Needed for Females Vaccinated Against HPV

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