Should men get the HPV vaccine?

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Should men get the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination is not the only question we should ask. First, we should ask if HPV is a problem. The answer, of course, is “yes.” It is the leading cause of cervical cancer in women and it is associated with anogenital cancers in a small number of men. There is enough science behind it all to say that certain types of HPV in certain types of people will cause certain types of problems. The question of whether or not this is a problem that men should be concerned about is a more complicated one. Looking at the numbers will shed some light on the issue.

Vaccinating all the men in the United States will cost approximately $2 billion. This should prevent 1,000 deaths from cancer per year.¹ Currently, the vaccine costs approximately $375 and is often covered by insurance.² But for some patients, cost may be an issue as may the need for follow-up evaluations like PAP smears for women or physicians’ checks for men. In any case, price should never be placed on a human life. And, the cost of this vaccine should not be a deciding factor when it comes to deciding whether or not to get vaccinated.

A key issue that needs to be brought forward is whether the purpose of healthcare is intended to help the individual or is it intended to help the community as a whole. Both the interests of the individual and of the community should be taken into account when making healthcare decisions.

For men who do not engage in high-risk behavior that can lead to the transmission of HPV, there is no reason for them to get the vaccine. But for men who engage in high-risk behavior, including certain types of sexual behavior that can lead to the transmission of HPV, it would be in the community’s best interest for them to get the vaccine so that they themselves and others that they come in contact with will no longer be at as great a risk. Although it would be in the best interest of the community for them to be vaccinated, their own concerns should take precedent. It is up to each individual to weigh the risks and the benefits.

The HPV vaccine has been known to cause a wide variety of side effects ranging from paralysis to epilepsy. More than 1,300 girls in the United Kingdom have experienced these and other side effects as a result of the vaccination.³ Because of this, it would probably not be a good idea for all men to get the HPV vaccination at the current time. However, at some point in the future when these side effects are no longer an issue, men who engage in the behavior that puts them at a high chance of spreading HPV and infecting others should get the vaccine.

HPV has also been known to cause anal and penile cancer in men.⁴ This can happen when HPV is contracted through anal intercourse between men. Men who engage in or plan to engage in homosexual activities such as anal intercourse, would be well advised to receive the HPV vaccination despite its potential side effects.

But can’t we wait to vaccinate until we know how long the vaccine will last? With the downside being genital warts, and the possibility of developing an incredibly rare although lethal cancer, it isn’t the most burning question on our minds when we worry about our health. People who are worried about these specific issues now have an excellent answer to address their concerns. Since we have a good answer to the issue of HPV, it makes physicians and patients more comfortable with the issue. But it is still the answer to a question that most men are not asking.

References:

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