Gardasil... Can I get it if I already have HPV? [1]

Alice,

I was reading several sites about Gardasil and the other shot that is given to people to prevent genital warts from occurring if they come in contact with HPV. I am a 29 year old male, and I was wondering if I could get the vaccine even though I have HPV already? I have had two warts in the past (which were burnt off) on the head of my penis. The procedure was excruciating and I dont want to go through that again. I'm told they will eventually come back some day. (sigh)

My girlfriend is the one who gave this to me and she was treated with the Gardasil shot, doctor knowing she already had HPV... This has stirred up a lot of confusion in me.

Please help!?!?

Seattle, WA

Answer

Dear Seattle, WA,

Kudos to you on inquiring about inoculations! HPV vaccines protect against certain types of the HPV virus by making the immune system produce antibodies against it. A patient's prior exposure to HPV and age are two very critical things to consider before s/he receives three doses of the vaccine. Unfortunately, these vaccines, including Gardasil, do not cure HPV. They do not work for a person who has already been exposed to the strains of the virus in the vaccine. As far as age goes, the vaccine is recommended for women and men up to age 26 (approved age ranges vary a bit between specific vaccines). Vaccinating a person before his or her first sexual encounter is thought to be most effective, although the vaccine can also be administered to someone who is already sexually active to reap some protection against strains they have not yet been exposed to.

If vaccinated prior to infection, Gardasil protects against HPV types 16 and 18, which cause about 70 percent of cervical cancer cases. It also protects against HPV types 6 and 11, which cause 90 percent of cases of genital warts. A newer version of Gardasil (Gardasil-9) protects against five additionals strains that cause approximately 15 percent of cervical cancers and are
not covered by previously FDA-approved HPV vaccines. Gardasil-9 also has the potential to prevent 90 percent of cervical, vulvar, vaginal and anal cancers caused by these HPV strains. Cervarix is another type of HPV vaccine that protects only against HPV types 16 and 18.

There are more than 40 types of HPV that are passed through sexual contact. In men, some types of HPV can cause genital warts, while other types can cause penile, anal, or head and neck cancers. The types of HPV that can cause genital warts are not the same as the types that can cause cancer. However, keep in mind that a healthy immune system is usually able to clear the HPV virus, or at least suppress it, over time. Most men who contract HPV (of any type) never develop any symptoms or health problems. Unfortunately, there are no blood tests clinically available to diagnose a person for HPV prior to vaccination for men. Most of the time, patients are diagnosed when visible genital warts appear.

While you and your partner may fall out of the age range and have both been exposed to HPV, there is no harm in speaking with a health care provider to determine your next step. For those who are infected with HPV, the vaccine may help to prevent them from becoming infected with other types of HPV. Depending on which types of HPV you and your partner have been exposed, the vaccine may be appropriate for either of you.

If you have already had visible warts, the next vital issue is preventing transmission to other partners! The safest way to prevent transmission is to avoid sexual contact around the areas with warts. Using barrier methods (condoms and dental dams) can reduce the risk of transmitting infection, but doesn't eliminate it entirely because HPV can be present on parts of skin not covered by a condom or dental dam. You and your partner will have to come to an agreement about what kind of risk you are comfortable with. HPV can be dangerous, but often goes away on its own without causing any damage. Again, compliments to you for your concern about your own health and the health of your partner.

Alice!
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