

MAIL TODAY

IF YOU ARE YOUNG AND RARING TO GO

By RITUPARNA MUKHERJEE

YOU WOULD agree that immunising your child against the likes of polio, hepatitis and even chicken pox is very important right? Well then, a vaccination is available for another dreaded disease for the first time. The HPV vaccine, launched in India a year ago, protects against cervical cancer, one of the most prevalent forms of cancer among women today.

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a very common and easily contracted sexually transmitted infection which can develop into cervical cancer. "The HPV vaccine is an effective preventive measure that should be included in the immunisation programme, especially now since sexual experimentation begins very early. Girls between the ages 12-14 should be given the vaccine before they become sexually active and exposed to the virus," feels Dr Mukta Baxi, senior consultant oncology, Fortis La Femme. At the moment it is not included in routine immunisation procedures as there is hardly any awareness about it.

"There has been no media propagation at all, unlike the hype that surrounds vaccination against polio or even for emergency contraception. Just as they are lifesaving methods, this vaccine deserves all the publicity it can get seeing the high incidence of cervical cancer in India," says Dr A K. Anand, Chief, radiation oncology, Max Healthcare. A combination of screening, early detection and vaccination should be enforced, especially in the lower strata of society and villages. If cervical cancer is detected at stage I, then it is easily curable 90 per cent of the time.

CAUSED BY A VIRUS

WHEN EXPOSED to the HPV virus, a woman's immune system typically protects her from its harmful impacts. In a small group of women however, the virus survives for years before it eventually converts some cells on the surface of the cervix into cancer cells. "What causes the cells to become abnormal and develop into cancer is not clear. However it is certain that HPV plays a role, since HPV is detected in nearly all cervical cancers. Since it is sexually transmitted, most women will contract this virus by the time they are 50," says Dr Anand. This does not mean, however, that cervical cancer will result. "There are about 40 types (strains) of this virus that can affect the genital area of both men and women but most of them cause no symptoms and require no treatment," says Dr Baxi. More aggressive strains of HPV cause cervical cancer in women and other less common cancers like cancer of the

vagina and the vulva. Other types of HPV cause genital warts, which though not life threatening, is a very painful and embarrassing condition.

OTHER RISK FACTORS

Along with HPV, other risk factors such as genetic makeup, environment, hygiene and lifestyle choices also play a role in the development of this disease. Multiple sexual partners, early sexual activity, genetic makeup, a weak immune system and smoking also considerably raise the risk. "Having sex before the age of 18 seems to up the chances of this cancer — immature cells seem to be more susceptible to the pre cancerous changes that HPV can cause," says Dr Baxi. The link between smoking and cervical cancer isn't quite clear, but tobacco apparently increases the risk of precancerous changes in the cells, and smoking and HPV infection may

work together to cause cervical cancer. If hygiene is not maintained it increases the risk of developing and harbouring the virus even more, so practicing good hygiene is absolutely essential. Women should wash thoroughly after visiting the restroom. Knowing how to wash correctly is crucial — always wash downwards using the hands and wash for at least 2-3 minutes. Men should make it a point to cleanse the tip of the penis after visiting the bathroom. HPV spreads through skin to skin contact — not just during actual intercourse so using condoms during foreplay if not actual sex, reduces the chances of contracting HPV considerably.

SCREENING IS IMPORTANT

PREVIOUSLY, a Pap smear test was the only method of detection and screening for the virus. Now, along with the Pap smear, doctors also use an HPV DNA test to

determine whether the patient is infected with any of the 13 types of HPV most likely to lead to cervical cancer. "Both the tests involve collecting cells from the cervix for lab testing. The HPV DNA test can detect high risk strains of HPV in cell DNA before changes to the cells of the cervix can be seen," says Dr Baxi. The HPV vaccine targets the types of HPV that most commonly cause cervical cancer and genital warts and is highly effective in preventing those types of HPV and related diseases in young girls. "The vaccine can also prevent pre malignant conditions. For example, the cell mutations caused by HPV may or may not develop into cancer. This vaccine will prevent the mutations itself," adds Dr Anand. However, since the vaccine does not protect against all types of HPV it will not prevent all cases of cervical cancer. Hence it is necessary for women to continue getting regular smear tests even after vacci-

nation. The vaccine also offers no protection against STIs.

PROTECTION IS KEY

THREE doses of the vaccine need to be administered over a period of six months with each shot costing between Rs 2500- Rs 3500. "No booster is required, even then people sometimes just take one shot and forget to follow up which renders the exercise quite futile," says Dr Anand. The side effects are nil or at the most mild, as is the case with all vaccines. Some women may experience mild joint pain, nausea and muscle pain. Hopefully, with increasing awareness, more and more women will opt for the vaccine, despite its cost. If a disease like cancer, with its only association with incurable suffering and inevitable death can be prevented, the opportunity should not be missed.

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These days of early sexual experimentation are making young women more prone to the human papillomavirus (HPV) which causes cervical cancer. The good news is that a preventative vaccine is now available