

HPV vaccine back in the news

Trying to decide whether your daughter should have the Gardasil vaccine?

Recent news about the vaccine, which protects against the four most common cancer-causing strains of the human papilloma virus (HPV), has certainly given parents more to ponder.

The report, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, cites links between the vaccine and 32 unconfirmed deaths, as well as some serious complications such as blood clots and neurological disorders and some minor side effects such as fainting and fever.

The editorial with the report questioned whether the benefit of the HPV vaccine is worth the risk.

Dr. Melissa Dugan-Kim, an OB/GYN with Northwestern Specialists for Women,

says she found the report reassuring because the side effects were no different than other common vaccines.

She notes that the JAMA report used data from the U.S. Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, a self-reporting system that doesn't exclude other factors. For example, she says, several of the deaths in the report were actually caused by car accidents not connected to the vaccine.

While pap smears can usually detect pre-cancerous cells, says Dugan-Kim, those procedures can result in minor complications as well. Besides, she notes, parents can't be sure their grown daughters will consistently visit a gynecologist or that their health insurance will cover the cost.

HPV is the most prevalent sexually

transmitted disease in the U.S. because it can spread through touch and isn't prevented by condom use. Roughly 30 percent of the population carries HPV at one time, but it is often cleared by the immune system. In some women, HPV can result in precancerous cells, which, if undetected, may result in cervical cancer.

That entire process may take 10 to 20 years, so researchers won't know the full impact of the vaccine for at least another decade.

For now, Dugan-Kim says, the research tells her that Gardasil "is just as safe as any other vaccine, and it's really the only thing that has the chance to essentially eliminate cervical cancer."

Dugan-Kim encourages young women to visit a gynecologist at age 21, or within three years of becoming sexually active.

Lisa Applegate