

## Important Notice

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## New needle for school girls

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**Sarah Bjurstrom** — A new vaccine is being added to the list of shots offered to Alberta's young students.

Dr. Laura McLeod, deputy officer of medical health with the DTHR said that the Gardasil shot will be available this fall to all Albertan girls in grade-five in an effort to curb and control the spread of the extremely common and contagious human papillomavirus: otherwise known as genital warts.

"The lifetime instance of HPV in women and men is over 70 per cent," she said, "and some studies indicate that 60 per cent of women become infected by their first sexual partner."

Dr. McLeod said that because girls can start to become sexually active at a younger age, and that Alberta Health decided it would be most effective to vaccinate them against the virus in the early adolescent years.

In a clinic, the series of three shots will cost them just over \$400 per person.

An HPV information site created by the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada says that there are 30 strains of the sexually transmittable disease, and because the virus covers more than just the genitals themselves that condom's often won't work to prevent the spread of HPV.

"We already have a hepatitis B vaccine in grade-five," said Dr McLeod, "so it's an easy way to link the vaccine to an existing delivery system, but the key thing is that you want to give it to the girls before they become sexually active."

Dr. McLeod said that one of the major problems with HPV is that for the most part the only way you'll know it's there is from the warts, meaning that they can only treat the symptom for now.

Though the warts and virus are not deadly, recent research has indicated a direct link between HPV and cervical cancer.

"Some strains of the virus, but not all, can cause cervical cancer." Dr. McLeod said. "Like cervical cancer, you can detect it with pap smears, and women should be regularly getting pap smears done once they're sexually active."

She added that pap smears are important because of that: "every year in Canada 1,350 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer, and about 390 women die. In Alberta, about 180 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer every year, and 40 women die from it every year."

The Center for Disease Control website said that Gardasil has only been licensed for use on girls and women between the ages of nine and 26-years-old, and only protects against four of the dozens of strains of HPV: strain number six, 11, 16, and 18. It also says that studies are being done to determine if the vaccine is safe for boys and men, and as effective at protecting them against penile and anal cancers. The Health Canada website says that HPV types 16 and 18 are high-risk types, and cause approximately 70% of cervical cancers found in Canadian women.

She also acknowledged the controversy over Gardasil caused by a MacLean's Magazine article

published on August 27, 2007, titled "Our girls are not guinea pigs," but wasn't convinced by their arguments. The MacLean's article, summed up, talked about how Gardasil was rushed to the market and that parents of the girls who were vaccinated did not get enough information about possible side-effects caused by the shots.

The article claimed that 1,637 of the vaccinated American girls reported a wide array of reactions, varying from stiffness, to seizures, to paralysis, and in three cases; death.

The deaths were dismissed, however, as a side effect of birth control pills that caused blood clots that two of the girls were on, and that the third died as a result of a previously known heart disease. The article was adamant that it was a bad idea to introduce the vaccine, and was backed up by Abby Lipman, an epidemiologist at McGill University in Montreal, who told MacLean's, "We're making guesses that it's going to last long, that [we're immunizing] the right age [of girls], and that it's effective. We don't have a solid basis for this thought."

This hasn't shaken Dr. McLeod's confidence in the vaccine, however, because she said she formed her opinions on the National Advisory Committee on Immunizations (NACI), which is a Canadian body that reviews the research and trials each vaccine goes through. She said that they're all either public health experts, vaccine experts, or contagious disease experts and that they look at all the data and what's being recommended for use in Canada.

"My confidence lies in those experts," she said, adding that she feels that they're unbiased because they are not funded by pharmaceutical companies.

"They're experts in the field and I trust their judgement. They said it's a safe vaccine and an effective vaccine, so that's what I'm going with."

She said that she has heard a lot of parents express concern that this vaccination could promote promiscuity in younger girls, but said that likely will not be the case: "HIV, AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhoea, Chlamydia - there are so many other things out there that kids can be exposed to from unprotected sex, that vaccinating them against this one cancer is going to eliminate one scary thing that might influence their decision making."

Although Gardasil's website advertises it as being a vaccine directly against cervical cancer, which is misleading, many medical professionals have concluded that it is a safe and effective vaccine. Now it's just up to each parent to research the disease and vaccine to decide if they want their young daughters to receive it.

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