

Tulane oncologist says vaccine is best protection for cervical health

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“A vaccine is available to everyone between the ages of nine and 45 that can prevent multiple forms of cancer, yet many people don’t get it,” says [Jessica Shank, MD](#). Dr. Shank is an assistant professor and Section Chief of Gynecologic Oncology at Tulane University School of Medicine, where she tells her patients and colleagues that one of the most important things people can do for their long-term health is get the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, there were about 43 million HPV infections in 2018, many among people in their late teens and early 20s. HPV is so common that almost every sexually active person will get HPV at some point if they don’t get vaccinated. While the virus can go away on its own, it has the potential to lead to serious health problems in the cases where it does not. HPV can cause

cervical and other cancers - including cancer of the vulva, vagina, penis, or anus. It can also cause head and neck cancers.

“The Gardasil vaccine now covers nine types of HPV, two that cause genital warts and seven that cause cancer,” said Shank. “Cervical cancer can be a devastating cancer. If you don’t catch it in Stage 1 and treat it immediately, treatment can be brutal.”

The CDC currently recommends vaccination for all preteens starting at the age of 9 years old and through everyone the age of 26. Adults ages 27 to 45 can also get the vaccine, though there’s a likelihood anyone in that age range has already been exposed if they’re sexually active but the vaccine is still recommended.

Dr. Shank says patients who have HPV and have been diagnosed with a high-grade precancerous lesion benefit from getting vaccinated after being treated. The Gardasil vaccine decreased the risk of recurrent lesions.

“A lot of people think, ‘I already have HPV, why should I get the vaccine?’” said Dr. Shank. “It’s going to protect you from the eight types of HPV you don’t have and it’s actually going to boost your immune system and help you clear the type that you do.”

[April 10-16 is STD Awareness Week.](#) More than 14,000 women in the United States are diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer each year, but almost all cases of the disease can be prevented by the HPV vaccination and routine screening. To make an appointment with the expert team of Tulane Obstetrics and Gynecology physicians, [click here](#).