

News Release

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MDH launches new effort to improve HPV vaccination rates among state's adolescents

Only one-third of girls, even fewer boys receive all doses of cancer-fighting vaccine

The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) today announced a new effort to increase coverage rates for the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine among adolescents in the state. The plan includes a public awareness campaign geared toward families of adolescents, a direct mailing with vaccination reminders and education opportunities for health care providers.

The effort was made possible by a \$600,000 grant awarded to the department by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Following a competitive process, Minnesota was one of 7 states and 4 cities to be awarded the funds.

The primary purpose of the HPV vaccine is to prevent cancer. The vaccine protects against the strains of HPV that cause 70 percent of cervical cancer in women as well as several other types of cancers in men and women. The vaccine, given in a series of three shots, is recommended for adolescent girls and boys beginning at 11 years of age. It can be given at the same time as the vaccines that prevent whooping cough and meningococcal disease, as well as any other vaccines an adolescent may be due to receive.

Despite its cancer-fighting ability, the vaccine is greatly underused, health officials say. According to a 2012 survey, only 33.1 percent of young women in Minnesota had received the full three doses, mirroring the national rate of 33.4 percent, and slightly more than 59 percent of Minnesota girls had received the first dose. Among teen boys, to whom the recommendation was more recently expanded, first-dose vaccine coverage was only 20.8 percent.

“Taking into account cervical cancer alone, if we could vaccinate 80 percent of young women in the U.S. today, we could prevent 98,800 cases of cancer and 31,700 deaths, according to CDC estimates,” said Kristen Ehresmann, director of infectious disease for MDH. “Our goal in Minnesota is to reach that 80 percent coverage level of three doses of HPV vaccine for females age 13 to 15 by 2020. We hope this grant will give us a big boost toward that goal.”

Minnesota’s three-part strategy for using the grant includes the following:

- A public awareness campaign will use a variety of media and advertising vehicles to reach high-school and middle- school-age students and their families, including working with culturally and ethnically diverse media outlets to place ads and articles about HPV and other adolescent vaccines.
- In its postcard reminder project, MDH will send postcards to the families of all 11- and 12-year-olds in the state informing them of the importance of the adolescent vaccines and encouraging vaccination.
- For the health care community, MDH will offer a variety of in-person and online opportunities for providers to update their knowledge and skills regarding adolescent vaccination. Provider education is important, Ehresmann said, because studies consistently show that a strong recommendation from a provider is the single best predictor of vaccination and an important factor in a parent’s decision to vaccinate their child.

The grant activities will complement the department's efforts to inform parents and health care providers of new immunization requirements for school enrollment that take effect this fall, including Tdap and meningococcal vaccines for adolescents. While HPV is not included in the new requirements, MDH strongly recommends that adolescents receive all three vaccines at the same time. These activities also coincide with the Minnesota Cancer Alliance's current initiative to promote HPV vaccine as a cancer prevention measure.

The HPV grant runs through Dec. 31, 2014.

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