

# Why is an HPV vaccine being blocked?

By Meryl

HPV (the disease that causes genital warts) is one of the most common STDs in the world. About half of sexually active women age 18-22 have it. Most strains of the virus are harmless and will go away without treatment. However, some strains are more dangerous. HPV-16 is responsible for 50% of HPV caused cases of cervical cancer, and a dozen other strains account for the other half. 15,000 women in the US are diagnosed with cervical cancer each year, and 4,100 will die from it. Worldwide 500,000 women are diagnosed and 250,000 will die. Statistics are dismal, saying that these numbers could increase four-fold by 2050. Since condoms are not always effective in preventing transmission of the virus, and because many developing countries don't even have access to condoms, it is very difficult to control.

There is hope, though. Currently, two pharmaceutical companies are developing a vaccine that would prevent both the contraction of HPV-16 and the development of cervical cancer. Studies are producing great results; the vaccine has been 69% effective against contracting the virus and 100% effective in preventing cancer in those who did get HPV-16. Since the vaccine will not prevent cancer if one already has HPV-16 some want to make it mandatory for teenage girls to get vaccinated.

This has become problematic for many religious and right wing groups who believe that this will encourage girls to become promiscuous or give them the idea that they are expected to be sexually active. They also believe that this could be detrimental to their efforts to make sexual education completely abstinence only, even though it has been demonstrated over and over again that teenagers who are given abstinence only education are not only more likely to become sexually active, but are also more likely to contract STDs like HPV-16. Worse even, it's safe to say that a teenager who wasn't educated on the facts about STDs would not know about proper treatment or the risk of cancer. With a virus so common and that also puts women at risk for cancer, it seems ridiculous to block a hugely effective preventative vaccine just because people are worried that it could make teenagers want to have sex more. Is it really important for adults to have clean consciences knowing that even if it didn't work, they *tried* to keep teenagers abstinent? Or should we be more worried about women's health in general?

Fortunately, surveys have shown that 80% of American parents would want their daughters vaccinated (including Gene Rudd, associate executive director of the Christian medical and dental association who opposes the vaccine admitted that he *would* want his own daughters vaccinated). The two companies developing the vaccine, Merck & co and GlaxoSmithKline, have been lobbying aggressively and meeting with concerned groups in an attempt to calm them and convince them of the overwhelming benefits of use of the vaccine.