

New cervical cancer vaccine won't replace Pap tests, reports the *Harvard Health Letter*

BOSTON — Over the past 30 years, the number of cervical cancer deaths in the United States has dropped by half to 4,000 deaths a year. The main reason for the decrease is the Pap test, which screens for the disease. Now cervical cancer prevention has entered a new era, with the FDA's recent approval of a vaccine against human papillomavirus (HPV). Scientists believe certain strains of this virus cause nearly all cervical cancers. Although the vaccine promises to save lives, it won't make Pap tests unnecessary, reports the September issue of the *Harvard Health Letter*.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all 11- and 12-year-old American girls get the shots, although girls as young as 9 could receive it. For "catch-up," the CDC also recommends that girls and women ages 13–26 be vaccinated.

The vaccine works best before an individual has been exposed to HPV. Older girls and young women are included in the CDC recommendations because even if they've been exposed to HPV, it may not be to the strains contained in the vaccine. More studies are needed before recommendations can be made for women older than 26 and for males. It's up to individual states to decide if the HPV vaccine will be required for school entry.

With the HPV vaccine, Pap test screening could begin later in life and be done less often. But for now, it is still essential. The new vaccine doesn't protect against all strains of HPV, including those that may account for about 30% of cervical cancers. Regular Pap tests remain the best way to prevent those cancers.