HPV Vaccine
What Parents Need to Know
by Linda Klepacki RN, MPH

Introduction
Fifty years ago the typical high school health-education class discussed two types of sexually transmitted infections (STIs): syphilis and gonorrhea. Now more than twenty-five significant diseases are known to be transmitted skin to skin or by exchange of body fluids during sexual activity. Approximately 20 million new cases of STIs occur each year, of which about half are among persons aged 15-24.

What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?
HPV is the most common STI in the United States, with approximately 79 million Americans infected. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HPV is so common that most sexually active individuals will acquire it at some point in their lives. There are approximately 150 types of HPV with about 40 that are sexually transmitted. Most people who are infected with the virus have no symptoms, and the infection clears up without intervention. Other people, however, can develop genital warts and pre-cancerous changes in cells in their cervix, vulva, anus, or penis. Still other infections progress to cancer in these and other areas. HPV is the primary cause of virtually all cervical cancers, and is implicated as a cause of roughly 70% of cancers arising from the mouth and throat. The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2016, nearly 13,000 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer and more than 4,100 women will die from the disease. In addition, more than 48,000 new cases of mouth and throat cancer will be diagnosed in 2016, and roughly 9,600 will die from this disease. (This form of cancer occurs in about twice as many men as women.)

How can this infection affect my children and teens?
Less than half of our high school youth have had sexual intercourse, yet intercourse seems to be the activity that we concentrate on most when talking to our children about living God’s design for human sexuality. Our children may be involved in other activities that they don’t commonly think of as “sexual.” We must do all we can to help them understand that “all sex is sex” and capable of transmitting STIs. Our children and teens need to know that many forms of sex can transmit this potentially deadly virus.

- HPV is primarily transmitted from an infected person by skin-to-skin contact that involves genital touching.
• HPV can be transmitted by sexual intercourse.
• HPV can also be transmitted by oral sex.

What can you tell me about the HPV vaccine?
Vaccines to prevent HPV have been in development for many years and represent a
tremendous breakthrough in science that will likely save hundreds of thousands of
women’s lives around the world. Two pharmaceutical manufacturers —
GlaxoSmithKline and Merck — have developed HPV vaccines, although Merck’s
vaccine (Gardasil 9) is the only one currently marketed in the United States. Gardasil 9
provides immunity for at least nine types of HPV and is intended for use in both males
and females. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the use of
Gardasil 9 in females and males ages 9 through 26.

What are the current recommendations for the HPV vaccines?
The CDC recommends that girls and boys 11 to 12 years-old be vaccinated against HPV.
Proponents cite several reasons for giving this vaccine to pre-teens:
• It is easier to “catch” all 12-year-olds at their regularly scheduled physical when
  they receive other immunizations.
• The vaccine appears to be more effective when it’s given at a young age.
• Immunization can provide an added measure of protection if given before
  someone becomes sexually active and has a chance of being exposed to HPV.

What else do I need to consider as a parent when deciding about this vaccine for my
child?
• The HPV vaccine does not, in any circumstance, negate or substitute God’s plan
  for sexuality, which is sexual abstinence until marriage and sexual faithfulness
  within marriage.
• Whether or not you decide to vaccinate your child, it is important to talk with
  him or her about this vaccine and about HPV as they will likely hear about them
  from their doctor, teacher, media and friends.
• No vaccine is 100% effective against infection or disease.
• There are more than 150 types of HPV. Gardasil 9 is effective against nine of
  these (and perhaps several more).
• The types of the virus that this vaccine protects against are the cause of most but
  not all cases of cervical cancer.
• HPV infection can result from non-consensual sex, including sexual assault and
  date rape.
• Young people may marry someone who is infected with HPV, thus putting
  themselves at risk for infection.
• The HPV vaccine does not protect against other STIs or prevent pregnancy.

See also our companion fact sheet “Talking to Your Children About HPV Vaccine” (FX451) and
Focus on the Family’s position statement on Human Papillomavirus Vaccines (MS006).
8 Ibid.