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Cancer vaccine is huge advance

By Tim Christie
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A local doctor is advising her patients to tell their friends about the new drug, Gardasil, approved earlier in June

The development of a vaccine for cervical cancer promises to save hundreds of thousands of women's lives worldwide and billions of dollars in the United States, a local cancer doctor says.

"In my opinion, this is one of the most exciting medical advances in 10, 15, 30 years," Dr. Audrey Garrett, a gynecological oncologist with Womens' Care in Eugene, said Friday.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration earlier this month approved Gardasil, a vaccine that protects against cervical cancer by preventing lasting infections among cancer-causing strains of the human papillomavirus, or HPV.

The vaccine was approved for women ages 9 to 26, and later this month a committee of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expected to recommend immunization with Gardasil for all girls ages 11 and 12.

That's because the vaccine is most effective when given before girls become sexually active. The vaccine's maker, Merck, is now trying to prove that it can also benefit young women ages 16 to 21 with limited sexual experience, Garrett said.

Garrett said she's telling her patients to tell their friends about Gardasil and, if they have daughters of an appropriate age, to talk to their pediatrician.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer worldwide, according to the World Health Organization, and the No. 1 cancer killer of women in the developing world.

"It's incredibly exciting if this vaccine can be given worldwide, and especially in impoverished countries where cervical cancer is a significant killer of women," said Garrett, who has a master's degree in public health.

In the United States, cervical cancer rates have declined about 50 percent in the last three decades as Pap smears became a regular part of women's health care. Cervical cancer afflicts about 9,700 women a year in the United States and kills about 3,700.

The vaccine should reduce those deaths in the United States and it also will mean women will be

subjected to Pap smears much less frequently, Garrett said.

"From a cancer death perspective, it will have an effect on global health, but it will have a huge effect in the United States from an economic standpoint," she said.

The National Cancer Institute estimates that \$1.7 billion is spent each year in the United States to treat cervical cancer.

Cost could be an issue with Gardasil. Merck expects to charge \$360 for a series of three shots given over six months.

HPV, the most common transmitted sexually transmitted disease in the United States, is responsible for about 99 percent of all cervical cancers.

About 80 percent of woman who have three sexual partners have been exposed to HPV, but most of the time, their immune systems can ward off the virus without a problem. But HPV can lead to cancer when it persists in a women's body, Garrett said.

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