

Bill would make girls get vaccine

Shots help block cervical cancer

By Laura Ungar
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The Courier-Journal

Middle-school girls would have to be vaccinated against a virus that causes cervical cancer under a bill introduced this week in the Kentucky legislature.

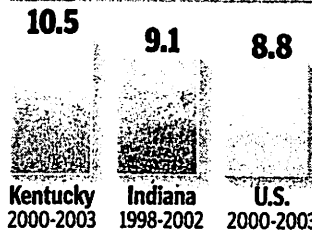
Critics contend, however, the law would take away parents' rights and possibly give girls implicit permission to have sex.

"It's time for the young women of Kentucky to take advantage of our first vaccine against cancer," said Rep. Kathy Stein, D-Lexington, who introduced the bill. "The idea that it encourages sexual activity — that's a bunch of hog-wash."

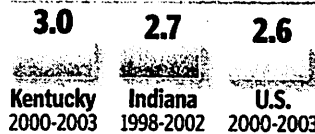
The bill would require girls in public and private middle schools to get a vaccine targeting four strains of the sexually transmitted human papilloma-

Cervical cancer (per 100,000 people)

Incidence rate



Death rate



Sources: Kentucky Cancer Registry, Indiana State Department of Health, National Cancer Institute's Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results

By Steve Durbin, The Courier-Journal

virus, also known as HPV. Two of the strains cause about 70 percent of cervical cancer cases.

The vaccine named Gardasil — which two University of

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ON THE WEB

Read the story at www.courier-journal.com/legislature for previous articles on the cervical cancer drug and a link to the bill's full text.

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Louisville researchers helped invent — was approved last year by the federal government for use by girls and women ages 9 to 26.

Proponents say requiring the vaccine will prevent needless pain and deaths in a state that has higher incidence and death rates for cervical cancer than the national average.

But others say parents should decide whether their daughters are vaccinated. Martin Cothran, senior policy analyst for the Family Foundation of Kentucky, said his Lexington-based group plans to lobby against Stein's bill.

"We're concerned about safety," Cothran said, adding that the vaccine's long-term effects remain unknown. "We're concerned about the implicit message that's sent."

Jennifer Branca of Oldham County, mother of girls in sixth and eighth grades at East Oldham Middle School, said she is interested in preventing cancer, especially because her husband is fighting pancreatic cancer. "I see the need to make the cervical cancer vaccine mandatory for 12- and 13-year-old girls like hers. "I would agree to it in high school," she said.

But even then, she wouldn't want the person giving the shot to stress to her daughters that it prevents a sexually transmitted virus; she would rather it be given routinely along with other shots.

Cervical cancer survivor Anna Bastin of Louisville, 64, said she has no reservations about requiring the

vaccine for middle-school girls.

"It's something I feel every young girl should have," said Istin, whose youngest granddaughter is 7. "You have no idea how devastating this disease is. ... This is going to save a lot of young girls' lives."

Lawmakers get involved

Stein said a national, bipartisan group of female legislators she is a part of, called Women in Government, is encouraging similar bills across the nation. Michigan was the first state to consider one.

Rep. Mary Lou Marzian, a Louisville Democrat who plans to sign onto Stein's bill as a co-sponsor, called it "common-sense legislation."

"The bottom line is it's going to protect women and save lives," she said.

It comes the same week the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released this year's recommended immunization schedule for children and teens which for the first time includes the cervical cancer vaccine. The recommendation targets girls 11 to 12, but also allows those as young as 9 to be vaccinated. The vaccine is considered most effective when given before sexual activity begins and is not approved for boys.

Manufacturer Merck & Co. has set the price at \$360 for a series of three injections, and it is often covered by insurance. Nationally, more than 20 million men and women are infected with HPV, according to the CDC, and there are 6.2 million new infections each year.



"It's time for the young women of Kentucky to take advantage of our first vaccine against cancer," said Rep. Kathy Stein, D-Lexington, who introduced the bill that would require the cervical cancer vaccine for girls.

Ed Reinke/Associated Press

Lesley Lantz, a nurse practitioner at OB/Gyn Associates of Southern Indiana in New Albany, said her practice treats a lot of HPV infections, and has recently been administering the vaccine to girls and women wishing to prevent them. She said she supports the idea of adding it to the roster of shots required of Kentucky middle-school girls.

"If we can prevent cancer," she said, "I'm all for that."

Dr. A. Bennett Jenson — a U of L researcher who helped invent the vaccine with colleague Shin-je Ghim and another researcher while at Georgetown University — said he would recommend that every middle-school-age girl get it. But he said the decision on whether to make it mandatory should be up to legislatures across the nation.

"I'm proud of the Kentucky legislature for being one of the very first to consider this particular issue," Jenson said.

Some concerns

Rep. David Floyd, R-Bardstown, said the vaccine itself is a great invention, but shouldn't be mandato-

ry for middle-school girls.

"I would prefer to leave that decision in the hands of parents and try to educate them," Floyd said.

Under Kentucky law, immunizations are not required of "any child whose parents are opposed to medical immunization against disease, and who object by a written sworn statement to the immunization of such child on religious grounds."

The conservative national organization Focus on the Family said the decision on whether to vaccinate young girls should rest with parents, and shouldn't be mandatory for school attendance.

In addition to moral issues and unknown long-term risks, Cothran said the vaccine may give people a false sense of security that they will be fully protected against cervical cancer when they would not be.

Despite opposition, Stein said she believes her bill, which has been referred to the House Health and Welfare Committee, has a chance of passing.

"I certainly hope so," she said.

Reporter Laura Ungar can be reached at (502) 582-7190.

ABOUT THE VACCINE

Lesley Lantz, a nurse practitioner with OB-Gyn Associates of Southern Indiana in New Albany, answered several questions about the new cervical cancer vaccine. Information also came from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Question: What is it and how does it work?

Answer: The vaccine, named Gardasil and made by Merck & Co. Inc., protects against four strains of the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, also known as HPV. Two strains cause about 70 percent of cervical-cancer cases.

Q: Who should get the vaccine?

A: The FDA approved the vaccine for girls and women 9 to 26 years old. The CDC recommended it for girls 11 and 12.

Q: Is it safe?

A: The FDA said safety was evaluated in about 11,000 people; most reactions were mild or moderate, such as pain or tenderness at the injection site. The manufacturer agreed to continue evaluating the safety and long-term effectiveness.

Q: Why is it recommended for girls so young?

A: It is most effective when given before sexual activity begins. However, even those who may have been exposed to one strain of HPV may still benefit because the vaccine protects them against three other strains as well.

Q: If the virus can be transmitted, wouldn't boys be vaccinated?

A: The vaccine is not approved for boys, but Merck is evaluating its safety and effectiveness in males.

Q: How many shots are involved?

A: Three. The second dose comes two months after the first one, and the third one at least four months after the second one.

Q: What is the cost?

A: Merck has set the price at \$360 for the series of shots, but some doctors add extra charges, such as stocking fees.

Q: Is it covered by insurance?

A: Often. Check with your insurance company.

Q: Where can I get it?

A: Many doctors are offering it. Call your doctor to find out.