

A3

THURSDAY
MARCH 1, 2007

TODAY, IN 1961

President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps.



Nation

www.courier-journal.com/nationworld

Prevalence of cervical-cancer virus examined

Study: More than a third of women infected by age 24

By David Brown
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — More than one-third of American women are infected by human papilloma virus, which in rare cases can lead to cervical cancer, by the time they are 24 years old, according to a study published yesterday.

The estimates suggest that there are 7.5 million girls and women aged 14 to 24 infected with the microbe — about two-thirds more than an earlier study had found.

Overall, about one-quarter of women under age 60 are infected at any given time, making the virus by far the most common sexually transmitted disease in the country.

News of the higher-than-expected prevalence of infection was balanced by the discovery that only 2.2 percent of women were carrying one of the two virus strains most likely to lead to cervical cancer — about half the rate found in previous surveys.

The lead researcher cautioned that the findings don't mean that HPV infection rates are rising, only that they are higher than thought.

"For us, it's just a different measurement — and a more accurate one," said Dr. Eileen Dunne, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The estimate comes from the federal government's ongoing National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

The findings, published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, are likely to further encourage use of a vaccine against the virus that was approved in June by the Food and Drug Administration for females aged 9 to 26. Its maker, Merck & Co., sells the vaccine, a three-shot course costing about \$360, under the trade name Gardasil.

Until recently, Merck was lobbying state legislatures to mandate vaccination of middle school girls — a step that more than 18 states are moving toward.

In Kentucky, the state Senate has received a House-approved bill that would require the vaccine for middle-school girls. But the bill also would allow parents to opt out.

There are dozens of strains of the virus, but only some of them can lead to cancer. Two — HPV-16 and HPV-18 — are responsible for about 70 percent of cervical cancers worldwide. The Merck vaccine protects against both, plus two other strains that cause genital warts.

In the 2003-2004 round of the national health survey, about 2,000 females aged 14 to 59 submitted self-collected vaginal swabs. Laboratory testing detected the virus in 27 percent of them. In the 14-to-24 age group, the rate was 34 percent. The highest prevalence — 45 percent — was in women ages 20 to 24.