

Cervical cancer jab in two years

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A vaccine against cervical cancer could be available within two years.

Trials of Gardasil, produced by pharmaceutical giant Merck & Co Inc, on 277 women have produced very promising results.

The journal *Lancet Oncology* reports it cut infection rates for the human papillomavirus - which causes most cases of cervical cancer - by 90%.

Cervical cancer kills 274,000 women world-wide every year - including 1,120 in the UK.

News of what could become the world's first anti-cancer jab has been widely welcomed.

Alison Nightingale was diagnosed with cervical cancer last August after a routine check-up following the birth of her second child, Zoe. She had a hysterectomy in September.

She said: "I don't want Zoe or any other girls to go through what I went through - a hysterectomy at the age of 31. To be told that I had cancer was a massive shock - I was absolutely devastated and you just think that you are going to die. It was the most traumatic thing I have ever been through. I am really excited about the vaccine - something that can prevent people from going through this awful turmoil. When I was diagnosed with cancer I thought I wouldn't live to see Zoe grow up. I'm delighted there's now a vaccine that can protect her and other girls."

The vaccine, made from a non-infectious virus-like particle, was also found to be 100% effective at preventing the appearance of pre-cancerous cells.

Four strains

The vaccine protects against four strains of human papillomavirus (HPV). Two are responsible for 70% of cervical cancers, and two cause genital warts - a sexually transmitted infection affecting up to 2% of adults. Although these warts do not cause cancer, they can lead to abnormal smear test results, and much anxiety.

Dr Eliav Barr, senior director of clinical research at Merck, said: "Gardasil was purposefully designed to target the HPV types most commonly associated with cervical cancer, as well as the types that cause genital warts and many abnormal Pap smears, to reduce the burden from HPV infection as much as possible."

Merck has started a major international trial of the vaccine involving more than 25,000 people, and hopes it could be on the market within two years. The researchers believe HPV vaccination would probably be most effective if administered to 10 to 13-year-olds who are likely to be free of the virus.

Charlie Girling-Budd is one of 110 young women recruited in Nottingham to test the vaccine.

She said: "A very close friend of my family got cervical cancer and had a hysterectomy and couldn't have children. So when I got the chance to be involved in the trial jumped at the chance."

Hazel Brook, coordinator of the Nottingham trial, said: "Every woman knows the stress that can be involved in having a smear test, let alone an abnormal smear or a diagnosis of cancer, so having an effective vaccine is a huge breakthrough."

Competition

Merck's vaccine is in head-to-head competition with a rival from UK-based GlaxoSmithKline plc called Cervarix.

Dr Anne Szarewski, of Cancer Research UK, said it was too early to say whether immunising 10-13 year olds was feasible, as, at this stage, nobody knew how long immunity would last. However, she said it would be advantageous to try to vaccinate girls before they became sexually active.