

Bill aims to make HPV vaccine more widely available

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State lawmakers have taken steps to ensure that more girls and women are protected against a virus that causes cervical cancer.

Authored by Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa, the bill would make more girls and women eligible to receive a vaccination against human papillomavirus.

The Senate Health Committee approved the bill last week. It next moves to the Appropriations Committee for further review. Evans, who represents Vallejo, authored similar legislation last year that was vetoed by the governor.

If passed, the law would require insurance companies to cover vaccinations against the virus for girls and women ages 11 to 26. Under current law, only girls 16 and younger in group health plans must be covered for the vaccination.

Expanding the pool of covered women and girls "is a common sense update" to current laws, Evans said. "This will save lives from being needlessly lost."

The vaccine - marketed under the name Gardasil - is about 98 percent effective in preventing diseases caused by four types of the virus, including genital warts and about 70 percent of cervical cancers, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Area health care providers said they already provide the vaccine to women up to age 26. It can also be administered to girls as young as 9.

On a legislative report, Kaiser Permanente is listed as an opponent of the legislation, but a Kaiser Permanente spokesman said the company already provides the vaccine up to age 26, as recommended by a federal immunization advisory committee.

"We feel that this is in the best interest of women," spokesman Jim Caroompas said of the vaccine.

Dr. Anat Sapan, of Sutter Solano Medical Center, said she frequently administers the vaccine to women in their 20s, and hadn't seen any rejections from insurance companies.

About half of sexually active people get the virus at some point in their lives, according to the CDC.

While medical professionals recommend girls get the vaccine early, sexually active women may still benefit because it is unlikely they would have all four types of the virus.

In California, it is estimated that about 1,400 women will be diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2008, and 400 will die from it. Latino and African-American women are especially likely to get cervical cancer, according to a statement by Evans.

The vaccine is given in three doses over six months, and costs \$360.

"That's pricey for a vaccine," Solano County nursing services director Barbara Navolanic said. County clinics provide the vaccine to girls age 11 to 18, she said.

Planned Parenthood also administers the vaccine.