For decades a widespread virus—human papillomavirus (HPV)—has been causing most cases of genital warts and cervical cancer in women. But a new and powerfully effective HPV vaccine has the potential to dramatically reduce the threat this virus poses to women’s health.

By Maria Mazzone Garrett
The widespread availability of an HPV vaccine will help bring us one step closer to our goal of ensuring that no more women die of cervical cancer.

—Susan Crosby, president
Women In Government
Talking Points: HPV and Cervical Cancer
Key public health facts for legislators

- The most important risk factor for developing cervical cancer is persistent cervical infection with certain strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV).
- HPV is easily transmitted through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. The infection often lays dormant in the body for years before causing illness, so it is very difficult to know when or from whom one acquired the virus.
- Most sexually active people get genital HPV. By age 50, at least 80 percent of women will have acquired an HPV infection. Most people will never know that they have HPV because usually there are no signs or symptoms and the virus goes away on its own.
- There are more than 30 strains of HPV that affect the genital tract. Of those, about 10 types are considered high-risk for progressing to cancer. HPV types 16, 18, 31 and 45 are the cause of more than 85 percent of the diagnoses of cervical cancer and high-risk pre-cancerous lesions.
- A new HPV vaccine has been licensed by the FDA for use in girls and women ages 9–6. The vaccine is highly effective in protecting women against HPV strains 16 and 18, which cause 70 percent of cervical cancers. Providing vaccinations to girls and young women before the onset of sexual activity will help protect the next generation from this preventable and deadly disease.
- The American Cancer Society estimates that there will be 9,710 new cases of invasive cervical cancer diagnosed in the United States in 2006, and about 3,700 women will die from the disease this year. The current incidence rate of cervical cancer among American women is eight cases per 100,000.
- Tests and screenings save lives. Widespread use of the Pap smear test to screen for and treat pre-cancerous conditions has led to a dramatic reduction in cervical cancer deaths. In the United States today, 50 percent of the women diagnosed with invasive cervical cancer have never had a screening test; an additional 10 percent have not been screened in at least the previous five years.

Source: Adapted from CDC’s Human Papillomavirus Infection Web site. www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/default.htm