A vaccine designed to prevent cervical cancer also may protect females from post-surgical recurrence of the disease, according to researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB).

A new study shows that the Gardasil vaccine reduces the likelihood of human papillomavirus (HPV)-related disease recurring after teen and adult women already have had surgery to remove cancer or certain pre-cancerous changes, said Warner Huh, M.D., an associate professor in the UAB Division of Gynecologic Oncology and lead presenter on the study.

The findings were announced March 15 at the annual meeting of the Society of Gynecological Oncologists in Chicago.

The study shows that Gardasil reduces by approximately 40 percent the chances that more cancer or pre-cancerous changes will occur in the cervix, vagina and vulva up to 3.8 years after a female has surgery for one of those conditions.

Huh said the findings are important because they answer a question many women and their doctors have been asking — does an HPV vaccine help prevent virus-related changes in the body after women have surgery to treat similar changes?

“Based on this study, the data is compelling and suggests it does help to prevent virus-related changes,” Huh said. “Knowing that Gardasil also may offer postoperative protection from recurrent disease will be crucial in follow-up care and overall health planning for teens and women.”

The vaccine is approved to fight the four HPV strains believed to cause 70 percent of cervical cancers and more than 90 percent of genital warts

The study involved 17,622 women ages 15 to 26 from two clinical trials, some who were vaccinated and some who were not. Hundreds of study participants had surgery to remove cancer or certain pre-cancerous changes of the cervix, vagina and vulva and to remove genital warts.

Huh said the results are encouraging because patients treated for HPV-related disease are known to be at higher risk for contracting the same disease post-operatively. Reducing the risk and need of a secondary procedure is an important step in improving women’s care, he said.

** Note: Huh maintains a consulting relationship with Gardasil-maker Merck & Co., Inc.*

The UAB Division of Gynecologic Oncology provides comprehensive prevention, detection and cure of female cancers, including cancers of the ovary, uterus, cervix, vagina and vulva, plus treatment of certain benign conditions requiring complicated pelvic surgery. Its physicians are leaders in their fields in a nationally ranked program dedicated to research, leading-edge treatments and community outreach. The division works closely with the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Lynn Cohen Clinic at UAB, which offers a team approach to cancer risk assessment, treatment and survival care.

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