

HPV vaccination

A wake-up call for physicians, dentists and health policy experts

The skyrocketing increase in head and neck cancers in the U.S. associated with Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), particularly in men, should have us in a panic.

HPV, our population's most prevalent sexually transmitted infection, is now an epidemic. A 2014 NHANES study showed that 11 mil U.S. men and 3.2 mil women have oral HPV infection—and it appears to be increasing at 30 percent annually. Of the 25 HPV strains known to cause Oral Pharyngeal Cancer (OPC), the most dangerous, HPV-16, is six times more common in men than women.

Gardasil-9 is a vaccine that protects for nine of the most cancer-causing strains and it's recommended by the CDC to begin at age 11-12, especially given that 50 percent of new oral HPV infections occur between 15 and 24 years of age. Oral HPV is transmitted primarily through oral sex.

The prevalence of oral sex isn't declining, so if we are ever going to

de-escalate this cancer epidemic, we need a generation of young people vaccinated! But, despite the overwhelming evidence for the value and safety of this strategy, HPV vaccination has not been embraced as it should. This year we will only vaccinate about one-fourth of 11 to 12 year-old boys and just shy of half of 11 to 12 year-old girls.

Why so few? The single most important reason adolescents get vaccinated is a strong medical recommendation. Studies show the medical community has fallen short on urging the vaccine. The fact that HPV is sexually transmitted can make this a difficult topic to broach with parents of adolescent patients.

Most of our public awareness for HPV vaccination has come from the Gardasil advertisements (by Merck & Co), as it relates to cervical, penile, anal and vaginal cancers. It's a crying shame that the FDA is delayed in assigning Gardasil's indication for prevention of oral cancer. Consequently, the HPV-OPC prevention

message is completely missing from those ads. Here's hoping that will change!

Meanwhile dental professionals (and YOU) can help! It's completely appropriate to discuss the HPV-OPC epidemic and recommend Gardasil-9 to our patients and loved ones—also to help our medical providers recognize the staggering reality of the OPC epidemic.

Don't wait until it's too late! Insurance covers young adults until the ages of 21 for males and 26 for females, but it is advised for anyone under 45, and there is nothing prohibiting adults over 45 from receiving it.



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