

# HPV VACCINE GIVES CANCER PROTECTION FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

WRITTEN BY ANN MUDER

*HPV is a virus that can cause cervical cancer. But it's not just a virus that affects women—HPV-related cancer can affect men as well.*



According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, every year, more than 33,000 men and women in the United States are diagnosed with an HPV-related cancer, including cancers of the genital area, mouth, and throat. Almost four out of 10 HPV cancers occur in men.

One of the fastest growing HPV-related cancers is cancer of the throat, also called oropharyngeal cancer. According to the CDC, 70 percent of oropharyngeal cancers are caused by the HPV virus. It's more common in men, and the rate is growing faster than any other type of cancer for the middle-aged white male demographic, explains Nicholas Wirtz, MD, oto-

laryngologist-head and neck surgeon with AdventHealth.

"It's been steadily increasing over the last 15 years, likely becoming more common than cervical cancer in the next one to two years," says Dr. Wirtz. "Cancer in the mouth and throat due to smoking and alcohol have been decreasing, yet we're still seeing a rise in oropharyngeal cancers due to HPV."

Between three to four percent of the population has high risk oral HPV, but the percentage who will develop cancer is significantly lower, says Dr. Wirtz. Most people with the virus won't get cancer because their immune systems will get rid of the infections within a couple of years. When the body's im-

mune system doesn't clear the infection, it can lead to cancer.

Because an oropharyngeal infection doesn't cause symptoms, those who are infected can unknowingly transmit the virus to their partners.

"Unfortunately, with oropharyngeal cancer, we don't have a test to screen patients like we can with a pap smear," says Dr. Wirtz. "While most people who have that high-risk strain won't develop cancer, there's just no way to predict who will and who won't."

## **HPV Vaccine**

Studies show that the HPV vaccine is effective in reducing the number of people with high-risk strains of HPV in their mouth and throat, says Dr. Wirtz. The vaccine protects against several strains of HPV, including HPV 16, which is the most common strain in oropharyngeal cancers.

The CDC recommends boys and girls ages 11 or 12 get the HPV vaccine so they can be protected before they're exposed to the virus. Two doses of vaccine are recommended for patients 14 and younger, with the second dose given six to 12 months after the first dose. For patients 15 to 26 years old, the vaccinations are given in three shots over six months.

Ideally, females and males should get the HPV vaccination before they become sexually active. Those who are already sexually active can still get the vaccine, but may get less benefit if they've already been exposed to the HPV virus.

Traditionally, Kansas has had the lowest HPV vaccination rates in the na-

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tion, but that's starting to improve, says Dan Leong, spokesperson for the American Cancer Society.

"We've made a lot of improvements, but still need to do more, especially in educating people about following through with getting the second shot in the series," he says. "We want to make sure people are educated about the HPV vaccine and understand its benefits."

The American Cancer Society is helping provide that education through its *Mission: HPV Cancer Free* campaign. By 2026, the goal is for vaccination rates in Kansas to get up to

80 percent completion for both boys and girls.

"If we had a vaccine for breast, lung, or prostate cancer, I think we'd run out of it, because everyone would be rushing to get it," says Leong. "We have the opportunity to give our kids a vaccine so they don't have to be diagnosed later in life with an HPV-related cancer. It's really about saving lives."

Parents should talk with their child's doctor about the best time to start the HPV vaccination schedule. Dr. Wirtz says he does recommend the HPV vaccine to his pediatric patients and to patients who have children.

Please check with your primary care physician to help answer any questions you have about HPV and the HPV vaccine. AdventHealth offers a connected network of care for every stage and age of health. AdventHealth Shawnee Mission is the only certified member of MD Anderson Cancer Network®, a program of MD Anderson Cancer Center, in Kansas City. If you are looking for a primary care physician for your family, visit [myhealthkc.com](http://myhealthkc.com). To learn more about AdventHealth, visit [AdventHealthKC.com](http://AdventHealthKC.com). ●

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