

# Public Health Officials Push for More Effort Vaccinating Kids Against HPV

Vaccination rates lag behind those for other childhood vaccinations.

By [Shari Roan](#)

Last Updated: 7/17/2019

Public health officials called for vast improvements in childhood vaccination against the human papillomavirus (HPV) during a congressional briefing June 27, 2019, in Washington, DC. HPV infections, experts testified, are causing significant increases in some types of cancers at a time when many other types of cancers are declining, per a [report published May 30, 2019, in the \*Journal of the National Cancer Institute\*](#).

[Vaccination](#) is the key to curbing [HPV](#)-related cancers, the experts said. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) [recommends](#) a two-dose vaccine for all boys and girls at ages 11 or 12 to ensure protection against the virus long before potential exposure. However, the vaccine can be given as early as age 9, and older children, adolescents, and adults can also be vaccinated.

Advertisement

Moreover, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended vaccination for some adults ages 27 to 45 who are not fully vaccinated, according to an [article published June 27, 2019, in Kaiser Health News](#).

Despite the strong backing of organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, as noted in a [report published in March 2017 in the journal \*Pediatrics\*](#), U.S. vaccination rates remain low. As of 2017, the most recent year for which [CDC statistics](#) are available, nearly 66 percent of U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 had received the first dose of the two-shot series and 49 percent had completed the recommended doses. Rates were considerably lower in rural areas compared with urban areas.

In contrast, other vaccines recommended to preteens or teens, such as the meningococcal vaccine to prevent meningitis, have uptake rates of more than 80 percent, says [Melinda Wharton, MD, MPH](#), director of the CDC's Immunization Services Division.

**Related:** [7 Common Myths About HPV](#)

## An Opportunity to Prevent a Huge Number of Cancers

HPV is a highly common [sexually transmitted disease](#). In about 9 out of 10 people, the virus goes away within two years without treatment, [according to the CDC](#). But in some people the infection lasts longer, and certain strains of the virus can cause cancer.

About 34,000 HPV-associated cancers occur in the United States each year, according to the [according to the American Association for Cancer Research](#), which hosted the briefing. Worldwide, the figure is about 630,000. The virus is likely the cause of more than 90 percent of anal and cervical cancers, 70 percent of vaginal and vulvar cancers, and more than 60 percent of penile cancers.

In the past, many cases of [oropharyngeal \(oral\) cancers](#), which can occur in men and women, were caused by tobacco and alcohol, but recent studies show that about 70 percent of oropharyngeal cancers may be linked to HPV or a combination of tobacco, alcohol and HPV, [per the CDC](#).

Most HPV-related cancers can be prevented with a three-pronged approach involving vaccination, early detection of HPV-related cancers, and treatment, the experts said.

A World Health Organization [study published June 26, 2019, in the journal \*The Lancet\*](#), which analyzed data from 65 studies, showed that after a decade of use, the number of HPV infections and precancerous growths was declining in many countries where the vaccine is recommended.

"What they document is that there is substantial success in reducing the incidence of infection," says [Gilbert S. Omenn, MD, PhD](#), chairman of the health policy subcommittee of the American Association for Cancer Research, and director of the Center for Computational Medicine and Bioinformatics at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "There is no question that this vaccine really works."

"What we're trying to achieve is, hopefully, to never see those cancers again," says [Anna R. Giuliano, PhD](#), founding director of the Center for Immunization and Infection Research in Cancer at the Moffitt Cancer Center. "This is an opportunity to eliminate these types of cancers."

**Related:** [Living Well With HPV: 5 Steps for Safer Sex](#)

## HPV Vaccination: Why Don't More Children Get It?

In the United States, parents may simply reject the vaccine because they don't fully understand its value, Dr. Wharton says. When parents are asked why they didn't have their children vaccinated, a major reason was that the vaccine was not recommended by the child's doctor. Healthcare providers could do more to explain the vaccine and strongly recommend it, she says.

Some parents may also mistakenly believe that the HPV vaccine is only for girls, because it was first approved, in 2006, for girls only, Dr. Giuliano says.

Oropharyngeal cancers in men have increased in the United States in recent years, driven by HPV, she notes. “That increase has been so dramatic in the last 15 years. There has been a doubling of men with diagnoses with HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer just in the United States.”

The briefing featured a male survivor of tonsil cancer who talked about his shock at his diagnosis, at age 44, after likely becoming infected with HPV during college. Jason T. Mendelsohn underwent painful and debilitating treatment for the cancer five years and in 2017 started his website, [SupermanHPV](#), to raise awareness on HPV-related cancers and the importance of vaccination, among males in particular.

“I wish the HPV vaccine would have existed when I was a young boy, as I likely wouldn’t have been diagnosed with cancer at age 44,” he says.

**Related:** [Oral HPV Is a Growing Concern in Men](#)

## Unequal Access to Vaccination in Other Countries

Worldwide, the challenge to reduce HPV-related cancers will be a bigger challenge. Statistics show a “global divide” on the issue due to less access to care and lack of vaccination in many countries, says [Julie S. Torode, PhD](#), director of special projects for the Union for International Cancer Control, who is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

The World Health Organization and other groups are tackling the issue beginning with a focus on cervical cancer prevention. The goal, Dr. Torode says, is “leave no woman behind and leave no countries behind, especially those with the highest burden.”

However, a shortage of the HPV vaccine is expected outside of the United States in the next few years, says [John T. Schiller, PhD](#), deputy chief of the Laboratory of Cellular Oncology, Center for Cancer Research at the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Maryland.

Experts are devising strategies to cope with the shortage in some countries, such as recommending one dose of the vaccine and delaying the second dose until the vaccine becomes more plentiful. Previous studies, Dr. Schiller says, suggest one dose may confer adequate protection, but a large, randomized clinical trial is needed to confirm that hypothesis.

“It’s incredibly frustrating that we don’t have higher impact due to limited distribution and uptake,” Schiller says. “But that doesn’t mean there aren’t things we can still do.”

**Related:** [Cancer Research News: A Weekly Roundup of New Developments in Cancer Research and Treatment](#)

## The Latest in HPV

