

Preventing HPV Positive Oropharyngeal Cancer

What is HPV

HPV (human papilloma virus) is a group of viruses that can cause warts in various parts of the body, particularly the genital and head and neck areas. Some types of HPV are known to cause cancer. While most of the media and medical community focus on HPV-associated cervical cancer, oropharyngeal cancer (related to the mouth and throat) is also as common as cervical cancer.¹

What causes oropharyngeal cancer?

While most oropharyngeal cancers are linked with tobacco and alcohol use, 25-35% of oropharyngeal cancers are caused by certain types of HPV.¹

Most HPV types do not cause any health problems, but 12 types are known to cause cancer. HPV16 is the most common type and is present in approximately 90% of HPV-associated oropharyngeal cancers.¹

How could I get an HPV infection?

HPV infection is very common: before the vaccine was available most sexually active people would develop HPV infection in their lifetime.¹ HPV is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact. Most HPV is transmitted sexually, but it can also be passed through other contact, such as kissing or childbirth.²

How can I protect myself against HPV infection?

There are currently three HPV vaccines available in Canada to prevent HPV infection: Gardasil®, Gardasil 9® and Cervarix™. All three vaccines protect against HPV types most commonly associated with cancer. All three HPV vaccines can prevent HPV infection if the vaccine is given before exposure to the type of virus present in the vaccine.¹

If you are infected with one type of HPV you can still benefit from the HPV vaccine as it can protect you against other strains of the virus.³

How do I get the HPV vaccine?

In Alberta, Gardasil® 9 is offered through the provincial routine vaccination program to all students in grade 6. If the HPV vaccine was not received in grade 6, there is a grade 9 catch-up program and individuals continue to be eligible for HPV vaccine at no cost until the end of grade 12. Additionally, men 17-26 years of age who have sex with men, and solid organ transplant recipients 9 to 26 years of age are also eligible for provincially-funded vaccine.⁴ If you are in one of these eligible groups, you can make an appointment for the vaccine at your local public health clinic.

If you are not in one of the eligible groups, the HPV vaccine can be prescribed by your family doctor or through a pharmacist.

¹ Canadian Cancer Statistics Advisory Committee. Canadian Cancer Statistics 2016. Toronto, ON: Canadian Cancer Society; 2016.

² Royal College of Dental Surgeons of Ontario. HPV101: What Dentists Should Know. *Dispatch Magazine*, August/September 2014, Vol. 28, No. 3, pages 42-43. Available at "[HPV101: What Dentists Should Know](#)".

³ Government of Canada. Human papillomavirus (HPV) <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/human-papillomavirus-hpv.html>

⁴ Alberta Health Services Immunization Program Standards Manual <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/hp/cdc/lf-hp-cdc-hpv-bio-pg-07-241.pdf>