Top Cancer Centers Call for Action to Get HPV Vaccination Back on Track

The COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted delivery of key health services for children and adolescents, including HPV vaccination for cancer prevention.

May 26, 2021 By St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

Today, doctors and scientists across America at National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated cancer centers and other organizations issued a joint statement urging the nation’s health care systems, physicians, parents and children, and young adults to get the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination back on track.

Dramatic drops in annual well visits and immunizations during the COVID-19 pandemic have caused a significant vaccination gap and lag in vital preventive services among U.S. children and adolescents--especially for the HPV vaccine. The pandemic also has exacerbated health disparities, leaving Black, Indigenous and other people of color; rural; and sexual minority adolescents at even greater risk for missed doses of this cancer prevention vaccine.

Nearly 80 million Americans - 1 out of every 4 people - are infected with HPV, a virus that causes six types of cancers. Of those millions, nearly 36,000 will be diagnosed with an HPV-related cancer this year. Despite those staggering figures and the availability of a vaccine to prevent HPV infections, HPV vaccination rates remain significantly lower than other recommended adolescent vaccines in the U.S. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, HPV vaccination rates lagged far behind other routinely recommended vaccines and other countries’ HPV vaccination rates. According to 2019 data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), just more than half (54%) of adolescents were up to date on the HPV vaccine.

Those numbers have declined dangerously since the pandemic.

Early in the pandemic, HPV vaccination rates among adolescents fell by 75%, resulting in a large cohort of unvaccinated children.

Since March 2020, an estimated one million doses of HPV vaccine have been missed by adolescents with public insurance--a decline of 21% over pre-pandemic levels.

Adolescents with private insurance may be missing hundreds of thousands of doses of HPV vaccine.

The U.S. has recommended routine HPV vaccination for females since 2006, and for males since 2011. Current recommendations are for routine vaccination at ages 11 or 12 or starting at age 9. Catch-up HPV vaccination is recommended through age 26. Adults aged 27 through 45 should talk with their health care providers about HPV vaccination because some people who have not been vaccinated might benefit. The HPV vaccine series is two doses for children who get the first dose at ages 9 through 14 and three doses for those who get the first dose at ages 15 and older and for immunocompromised people.

NCI cancer centers strongly encourage parents to vaccinate their adolescents as soon as possible. The CDC recently authorized COVID-19 vaccination for 12-15-year-old children allowing for missed doses of routinely recommended vaccines, including HPV, to be administered at the same time. NCI cancer centers strongly urge action by health care systems and providers to identify and contact adolescents due for vaccinations and to use every opportunity to encourage and complete vaccination.

More information on HPV is available from the CDC and National HPV Vaccination Roundtable.

This is the fourth time that all NCI-designated cancer centers have come together to issue a national call to action. All 71 cancer centers unanimously share the goal of sending a powerful message to health care systems, physicians, parents and children, and young adults about the importance of HPV vaccination for the elimination of HPV-related cancers. Organizations endorsing this statement include the Association of American Cancer Institutes; American Association for Cancer Research; American Cancer Society; American Society of Clinical Oncology; American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology; American Society of Preventive Oncology; and the Prevent Cancer Foundation.

STATEMENT

NCI-Designated Cancer Centers Call for Urgent Action to Get HPV Vaccination Back on Track

Cancers caused by human papillomavirus (HPV) are a significant public health problem in the United States (U.S.). But these cancers are preventable with HPV vaccination. The National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated cancer centers fully endorse the goal of eliminating cancers caused by HPV through gender-neutral HPV vaccination and evidence-based cancer screening.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly interrupted delivery of key preventive services, resulting in many U.S. adolescents missing routine HPV vaccine doses. Even before the pandemic, HPV vaccination uptake in the U.S. lagged far behind several high-income countries and remains well below the Healthy People 2030 goal of vaccinating 80% of boys and girls aged 13-15. To protect adolescents from cancers caused by HPV, it is urgent to act now to get HPV vaccination back on track.

NCI Cancer Centers strongly encourage parents to vaccinate their adolescents as soon as possible. The COVID-19 vaccination presents an opportunity for parents to protect their children by catching up on missed or due routinely recommended vaccines. The U.S. has recommended routine HPV vaccination for females since 2006 and for males since 2011.

Current recommendations are for routine vaccination at ages 11 or 12 or starting at age 9. Catch-up HPV vaccination is recommended through age 26. The guidelines recommend that adults ages 27 to 45 talk with a health care provider because some people who have not been vaccinated might benefit. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 54% of boys and girls ages 13-17 completed the HPV vaccination series in 2019, compared to 42% in 2015, with variability by geographic region. The COVID-19 pandemic has jeopardized these modest but positive gains. In spite of more than 15 years of safety and monitoring data and strong evidence showing reduction of HPV vaccine-type infection and cancers, HPV vaccination uptake still isn't meeting our national goal.

The U.S. is facing a significant vaccination gap, especially for adolescents, due to the pandemic. Well-child visits are down. Usual "back to school" vaccination activity for adolescents has been limited by virtual and hybrid learning. Early in the pandemic, HPV vaccination rates among adolescents fell by 75%, resulting in large numbers of unvaccinated children. It is crucial that the nation gets back on track with adolescent vaccination to ensure protected children and safer communities.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) has endorsed the safety and effectiveness of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine and its use in 12-15-year-old adolescents. CDC recommends that this vaccine be used among this population, and health care providers may begin vaccinating them right away. In addition, COVID-19 vaccines and other vaccines may now be administered at the same visit. Protecting your child from COVID-19 by getting them vaccinated is an easy opportunity to catch up on other vaccines like the HPV vaccine.

HPV vaccination is cancer prevention. Now is the time to catch up on missed doses of HPV vaccine to prevent future cancers. Contact your local health department or health care provider to schedule an appointment for missed vaccinations today.

More information on HPV is available from the CDC and National HPV Vaccination Roundtable.

This statement is supported by the American Cancer Society (ACS), the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR), the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), the Prevent Cancer Foundation, the American Society of Preventive Oncology (ASPO), Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI), and American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology (ASPHO).

FULL LIST OF SIGNATURES

Abramson Cancer Center of the University of Pennsylvania

Albert Einstein Cancer Center

Alvin J. Siteman Cancer Center at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine

Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute

Case Comprehensive Cancer Center

City of Hope

Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Cancer Center

Dan L. Duncan Comprehensive Cancer Center at Baylor College of Medicine

Dana-Farber / Harvard Cancer Center

Dartmouth and Dartmouth-Hitchock’s Norris Cotton Cancer Center

Duke Cancer Institute

Fox Chase Cancer Center, a part of the Temple University Health System

Fred & Pamela Buffett Cancer Center

Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center

Georgetown Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center

Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center

Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center

Huntsman Cancer Institute at the University of Utah

Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Comprehensive Cancer Center

Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research at MIT

Masonic Cancer Center, University of Minnesota

Mayo Clinic Cancer Center

Mays Cancer Center, home to UT Health San Antonio MD Anderson

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Moffitt Cancer Center

MUSC Hollings Cancer Center

O’Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham

OHSU Knight Cancer Institute

OU Health Stephenson Cancer Center

Perlmutter Cancer Center at NYU Langone

Purdue University Center for Cancer Research

Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center of Northwestern University

Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center

Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey

Salk Institute Cancer Center

Sanford Burnham Prebys Cancer Center

Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center - Jefferson Health

Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins

St. Jude Comprehensive Cancer Center

Stanford Cancer Institute

Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center

The Jackson Laboratory Cancer Center

The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center - James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute

The Tisch Cancer Institute at Mount Sinai

The University of Kansas Cancer Center

The University of New Mexico Comprehensive Cancer Center

The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center

The Wistar Institute Cancer Center

UC San Diego Moores Cancer Center

UCI Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center

UCLA Health Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center

UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center

UNC Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center

University of Arizona Caner Center

University of California Davis Comprehensive Cancer Center

University of Chicago Medicine Comprehensive Cancer Center

University of Colorado Cancer Center

University of Hawaii Cancer Center

University of Iowa Holden Comprehensive Cancer Center

University of Kentucky, Markey Cancer Center

University of Maryland Greenebaum Comprehensive Cancer Center

University of Michigan Rogel Cancer Center

University of Virginia (UVA) Cancer Center

University of Wisconsin Carbone Cancer Center

UPMC Hillman Cancer Center

USC Norris Comprehensive Cancer Center

Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center

VCU Massey Cancer Center

Wake Forest Baptist Health Comprehensive Cancer Center

Winship Cancer Institute of Emory University

Yale Cancer Center

American Association for Cancer Research

American Cancer Society

American Society of Clinical Oncology

American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology

American Society of Preventive Oncology

Association of American Cancer Institutes

Prevent Cancer Foundation

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