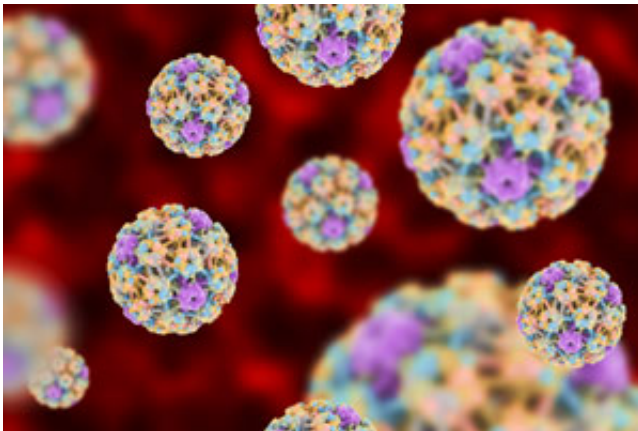


Nearly half of adults in US infected with HPV

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Credit: Rush University Medical Center

If you currently are sexually active, have been sexually active in the past or have sex in the future, there's an extremely high chance that at some point before your sex life is over you will have been infected with the human papillomavirus (HPV), a sexually transmitted infection that is linked to several cancers. Just this month, the National Center for Health Statistics announced that it found that 45.2 percent of men and 39.9 percent of women 18 to 59 years in age were infected with genital HPV during 2013 to 2014.

Even more alarming, the center found that during the same time period 25.1 percent of men and 20.4 percent of women were exposed to high-risk genital HPV, which result in about 31,000 cases of [cancer](#) each year.

A viral infection, HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection and can be spread between partners through anal, vaginal, or oral sex, and even through close skin-to-skin touching. The center's latest figures are a reminder that nearly everyone who is sexually active becomes infected with HPV during some point in their lives, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (which includes the NCHS).

"HPV is very common; up to 80 percent of sexually active people have been exposed at some point in their lives," says Summer Dewdney, MD, a gynecologic oncologist at Rush University Medical Center. "But the vast majority never develop any symptoms, and the body's immune system can usually clear HPV on its own within two years."

HPV causes nearly all cervical and oral cancers

But other times, the infection does not clear up. And since there is no cure for HPV, the virus puts people at risk for potentially serious problems—such as cancer and genital warts—down the road. Every year, more than 27,000 women and men are affected by the following cancers linked to HPV:

- Anal cancer
- Cervical cancer
- Oropharyngeal cancer, which includes oral cancer and throat cancer
- Penile cancer
- Vaginal cancer
- Vulvar cancer

Almost all of the more than 11,000 cases of cervical cancers diagnosed in the U.S. each year are caused by HPV. While oral cancers used to be attributed mainly to tobacco and alcohol, now 72 percent of oral cancers

(particularly in young men) are caused by HPV.

"There has been significant change in the last decade. The HPV-associated oropharyngeal cancer has reached epidemic proportions," says Kerstin Stenson, MD, a head and neck cancer surgeon at Rush.

"By 2020, HPV is projected to cause more oropharyngeal cancers than cervical cancers in the U.S.," adds Karen Lui, MD, a pediatrician at Rush

Protect yourself with HPV vaccine ...

The doctors recommend taking precautions to prevent HPV infection and catch infections that do occur before they become major health problems. "We have a vaccine for cancer," Dewdney says. "Use it!"

Two vaccines, Cervarix and Gardasil, are available to protect against the types of HPV that cause the most cervical cancers, as well as anal cancers in men. A doctor can administer the vaccine in three shots over a six-month period.

- Gardasil is recommended for girls and women between ages 9 and 26
- Cervarix is recommended for girls who are 9 years of age, plus women of any age who have not previously been vaccinated and have not previously been diagnosed with cervical cancer.
- The HPV vaccine is also recommended for boys, starting at age 11.

"If you aren't eligible but your children are the right ages, consider taking them to be vaccinated," Dewdney says. "But the important thing to know is that even if you were not vaccinated as a child, you can still get the vaccine up to age 26."

... get regular pap tests and dental exams ...

Additionally, Lui recommends annual PAP tests for women starting at 21 years of age—whether they've been vaccinated or not. Pap tests enable doctors to detect abnormalities—changes on the cells on a woman's cervix—and take action before cervical cancer develops.

"Screening is the best way to catch HPV-related cancers early," Liu says.

"Once you turn 30, we recommend pap smears every five years as long as you have HPV testing with your Pap and the results are negative," Dewdney says. "In addition, any bleeding with intercourse should be evaluated by a gynecologist."

According to the American Cancer Society, between 60 and 80 percent of women in the United States with newly diagnosed [invasive cervical cancer](#) have not had a Pap test in the past five years. And, even more alarming, many of these women have never had the exam.

Stenson stresses the importance of regular visits to the dentist. "Dentists play a key role in detecting oral cancer," she says. "You might not see a primary care physician even once a year, but most people see their dentist twice a year. Having regular dental visits can help catch cancers early to help ensure the best outcome."

... also, practice safe sex

Studies have shown that women who have many sexual partners increase their risk of developing HPV and their risk of cervical cancer.

"If you are sexually active, use a condom every time you have sex," Dewdney says. "Unprotected sex leaves you at risk for contracting [sexually transmitted diseases](#) that can increase your risk of getting HPV

and greatly increase your chances of developing precancerous changes of the cervix."

While condoms help to lower the risk of developing HPV-related diseases, including [cervical cancer](#), be aware that HPV can infect areas that are not covered by a condom, so condoms may not fully protect against HPV. That's why it's essential get the HPV vaccine in addition to using condoms.

Though studies have shown that using a condom properly and consistently—meaning every single time you have sex—can reduce HPV transmission, any area of the penis not covered by the condom can be infected by the virus.

"While the infection is most commonly passed by vaginal or anal sex, you can also transmit it during oral sex and skin-to-skin contact, and in those cases a condom isn't going to protect you at all," Lui says. "That's where the vaccine can help safeguard you."

Protect your children 'for the rest of their lives'

Due to controversy about vaccinating young people against a [sexually transmitted infection](#) and parental concerns about possible long-term effects of these relatively new vaccines, many children, teens and young adults aren't getting vaccinated, leaving them vulnerable to future HPV infection.

Lui encourages kids and parents to have an ongoing, open conversation about their wishes when it comes to being vaccinated.

"It's hard for some kids to admit to their parents that they're sexually active or are considering it," says Lui. "But it's important to be honest with your parents and tell them that you want to protect yourself."

Also, research has shown that getting the HPV vaccine does not encourage kids to become sexually active or start having sex at a younger age—a common concern cited by parents.

"Parents need to understand that just because their kids want the HPV vaccine, it doesn't mean they're promiscuous, or even that they plan to start having sex right away," Liu says. "They're talking about doing something now that can help keep them safe for the rest of their lives—and as parents, that's all we really want for our children."

Provided by Rush University Medical Center

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