

More dentists to discuss risks of HPV-related cancers with their patients

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The human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted disease. While vaccines are helping stop its spread, HPV is still the cause of 72 percent of oropharyngeal cancers, which impact the base of the tongue, tonsils and walls of the pharynx.

"Given the alarming increase of HPV-attributable oropharyngeal cancers, dentists and dental hygienists may be key agents for promoting HPV [prevention](#)," said lead investigator Ellen Daley, PhD, a professor at the University of South Florida College of Public Health. "However, there's a serious need for better training and education in the dental community."

In a study highlighted on the cover this month's *Journal of the American Dental Association*, Dr. Daley concludes most dentists don't discuss HPV prevention methods with their patients for a number of reasons. Some study participants admitted to not knowing enough about how one contracts HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer, its symptoms, transmission, progression and/or best prevention methods.

Others admit to lacking proper [communication skills](#) to discuss such a sensitive subject, especially when age is a factor. Younger patients are at most risk for HPV. So many in the dental community are uncertain if that conversation should happen with the adolescent patient or their parent. HPV could also be inactive for years, impacting older patients.

"I know as a professional, you really should be able to talk like that. But

for me, sometimes with patients the same age as my grandpa, I find it very uncomfortable to talk with him about anything related to HPV and their sexual activity," said one study participant. "I guess I'm a little weirded out by that."

Providing communication skills and training about HPV can assist dentists and dental hygienists in educating patients about the HPV vaccine, and recommending that patients who are adolescents and young adults (up to age 26) get the vaccine. Dentists or dental hygienists regularly perform oropharyngeal cancer screenings, however most only discuss it with patients who exhibit symptoms, such as a lump in the neck and sore throat. Many participants admit the hesitation comes as dental offices often lack sufficient privacy and they don't want to embarrass a patient.

HPV prevention methods are typically addressed by pediatricians, family medicine practitioners, obstetricians and gynecologists. Dentists and dental hygienists are seen by nearly 85% of children in the U.S., making them another important group of health care providers to address HPV prevention. Dr. Daley noted addressing dentists' HPV-related health literacy will allow them to better educate [patients](#), ultimately contributing to the reduction of oropharyngeal cancers.

Provided by University of South Florida

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