

CDC data suggests attitudes are shifting about the HPV vaccine: Utah vaccine rates among teens increased more than 16%

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Jonah Kepka receives his HPV vaccine. Credit: Deanna Kepka PhD, MPH

When life should have been ripe with possibilities, Mandy Murry instead faced a devastating diagnosis. Murry was diagnosed with cervical cancer

when she was 22. She had her cervix and uterus removed to treat it. Her doctor believes the cancer was caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV).

"I was expected to have that 'happily ever after' story of having my own kids," says Murry, age 41, who grew up in Utah and now lives in North Carolina. "I was not prepared for the depth of healing I needed after the surgery. Without a uterus, I felt 'less than.' I did not feel worthy of happiness. I did not choose HPV. It was given to me due to unforeseen circumstances. The [vaccine](#) did not exist when I was young so this could have been prevented."

HPV is a group of more than 200 related viruses, of which 40 are spread through direct sexual contact. It is the most common sexually transmitted infection and causes nearly all cervical cancers, in addition to five other kinds of [cancer](#): vaginal, vulvar, anal, penile, and oropharyngeal (cancers of the throat and mouth). HPV vaccines, given as a series of shots, protect against HPV infection and cancer.

Typically ranked among the lowest in the United States for adolescents adequately immunized against HPV, Utah saw a 16.4% increase in this vaccine for young men and women ages 13-17 since 2020, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The state jumped in rank from 44th to 20th in the nation among first-dose HPV vaccinations.

"It's the highest increase I've ever seen in our state," says Deanna Kepka, Ph.D., MPH, researcher at Huntsman Cancer Institute at the University of Utah and director of the Intermountain West HPV Vaccination Coalition, a group of health care specialists and [community members](#) who have been working since 2012 to improve HPV vaccination rates. Kepka suggests this shows a shift in attitude about the HPV vaccine, including acknowledgment that people may have more than one sexual

partner. "We're moving in the right direction. The truth is, life happens. A large portion of marriages end in divorce, no matter what a person's religious affiliation. It's best to protect kids from the unexpected."

More young men are getting the HPV vaccine in Utah, with a 19.7% increase since 2021, according to the CDC. The agency also found [throat cancer](#) has surpassed [cervical cancer](#) as the most common HPV-related cancer, underscoring the importance of both young men and [young women](#) getting vaccinated.

The CDC recommends all children and adults ages 9 through 26 years be vaccinated against HPV; though the HPV vaccine is most effective in early adolescence between ages 9-12, according to the American Cancer Society. "Kids mount a stronger immune response," says Kaila Christini, MsPH, MS, program manager with the Kepka Group. "They're likely to have better protection if they've had the vaccine at a young age."

Murry recommends all parents get their teens vaccinated for HPV. "You never know what will happen in life. The vaccine is not a license to have sexual activity. It can literally keep you from getting cancer," she says.

Shay Bilinski, senior director of cancer support strategic partnerships with the American Cancer Society, says, "There is still more work to do. Getting your child vaccinated for HPV is the gift of cancer prevention. Don't hesitate to give that gift."

HPV vaccination is covered by most private insurance plans. The Utah Vaccines for Children Program provides vaccines at no cost or low-cost for children through 18 years of age who are enrolled in Medicaid, CHIP, uninsured, or underinsured.

Provided by Huntsman Cancer Institute

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