

Pharmacists can improve access to life-saving vaccines with available technology

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HPV, or human papillomavirus, is the most common sexually transmitted infection. It is also the leading cause of cervical cancer. Over 1,400 Canadian women are affected yearly, with almost 400 deaths, according to the Canadian Cancer Society. It is completely preventable with the HPV vaccine, and yet, unfortunately, many people are

unvaccinated.

University of Waterloo researchers have found a possible solution to this on-going issues. Using an electronic questionnaire at the time of appointment scheduling for [seasonal influenza](#) or COVID-19 vaccines, researchers have found, is a quick and [efficient way](#) to identify people in Ontario willing to receive additional life-saving vaccines.

The study, "[Herpes zoster and human papillomavirus vaccination opportunities identified using electronic prompts at the time of scheduling influenza or COVID-19 vaccines](#)", has been published in the *Canadian Pharmacists Journal*.

"This is a massive opportunity for policymakers to focus on vaccine campaigns to reach more patients," said Dr. Wasem Alsabbagh, associate professor at the University of Waterloo School of Pharmacy.

Questions were embedded into MedEssist, a platform many pharmacists use for scheduling vaccination appointments, to reveal if individuals booking for their flu or COVID-19 vaccines are also eligible for HPV or shingles vaccines and their willingness to discuss these vaccines with their pharmacist.

"During a time of prevalent misinformation, providing robust information through health-care providers is essential," Alsabbagh said. "Pharmacists were at the front line during the pandemic and proved that they can talk to their patients, explain the importance of the vaccines, address their safety concerns and allow patients to make informed decisions."

Currently, we know that around 60% of people in Canada are vaccinated against HPV. However, the study revealed that of those booking their COVID-19 and influenza vaccine appointments, only 30% were

vaccinated against HPV. Overall, 20% indicated they were willing to speak to a pharmacist to discuss any concerns they may have.

"Vaccination can save lives and prevent a lot of adverse clinical outcomes," Alsabbagh said. "This would not only prevent [human suffering](#) but also lead to significant savings in the health-care system."

In Ontario, target vaccination rates for coverage are currently not being met. Offering other vaccines while booking for flu or COVID vaccines can be an optimal way to reach more vaccine-willing individuals.

The HPV and shingles vaccines were chosen as examples to conduct this research. While this research is solely focused on Ontario data, pharmacists and policymakers can extrapolate the results from this study to focus on other vaccinations that affect their communities.

More information: Sherilyn K.D. Houle et al, Herpes zoster and human papillomavirus vaccination opportunities identified using electronic prompts at the time of scheduling influenza or COVID-19 vaccines, *Canadian Pharmacists Journal / Revue des Pharmaciens du Canada* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/17151635231188343](https://doi.org/10.1177/17151635231188343)

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