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## Head and Neck Cancer on Rise in Young Men

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HPV-associated head and neck cancers are more prevalent

While still considered rare, head and neck cancers are striking younger men at a higher and more rapid rate. And many of the patients do not have the typical cancer risk factors: smoking, chewing tobacco, or consuming alcohol. The [human papillomavirus](#) (HPV) 16 infection is now thought to cause more than half of all cases of oropharyngeal cancer, a type of [head and neck cancer](#).

"The head and neck cancers we have found in younger men with no known risk factors such as smoking are very frequently associated with the same HPV virus that causes [cervical cancer](#) in women," said [Kerstin Stenson, MD](#), a head and neck cancer surgeon at Rush and a professor of otolaryngology at Rush University.

The cancer develops from an HPV infection, likely acquired several years earlier from oral sex.

"Men are more susceptible to these cancers because they don't seem to have the same immune response as women and do not shed the virus like women do," Stenson said.

### 'Epidemic proportions'

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cancers of the oropharynx (back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils) are usually caused by tobacco and alcohol, but recent studies show that about 72 percent of oropharyngeal cancers are caused by HPV.

"There has been significant change in the last decade. Overall, head and neck cancers account for approximately 3 to 5 percent of all cancers, but what's changed in the past decade is the HPV-associated oropharyngeal cancer. It has reached epidemic proportions," said Stenson.

The American Cancer Society estimates that 45,780 Americans will be diagnosed with cancer of the oral cavity and oropharynx in 2015.

If this trend continues, the number of cases of HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancer will surpass the number of cervical cancer cases.

### Early detection is key

The current vaccine has been shown to decrease the incidence of HPV-associated cervical infections and cancer. While the same result is anticipated for HPV-associated head and neck cancer, the impact of vaccines on incidence of persistent oral HPV infection and/or HPV associated oropharyngeal cancer has not yet been investigated. We will need about 10-30 more years to see the anticipated effect of the vaccine on HPV-related cancers that could affect people who are now teenagers. Still, head and neck surgeons, medical oncologists and other researchers strongly advocate vaccination of both girls and boys to help prevent all HPV-associated cancers.

"For all individuals, the key is in early detection, as with any cancer," Stenson said.

In addition to being vaccinated, Stenson stresses the importance of regular visits to the dentist. "Dentists play a key role in detecting oral cancer. 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."

The American Dental Association states that 60 percent of the U.S. population sees a dentist every year.

### Oral cancer warning signs

The Oral Cancer Foundation presumes that cancer screenings of the existing patient population would yield tens of thousands of opportunities to catch oral cancer in its early stages.



"There is much that can be done for those who are diagnosed with head and neck cancer. Since early detection and treatment is critical, it's important to see your dentist regularly and to promptly see a medical professional if there are any warnings signs," Stenson advised. Strategies to improve public awareness and knowledge of signs, symptoms, and risk factors are critical topics for study and may decrease the disease burden of head and neck cancers.

Possible warning signs of oral cancer may include difficulty swallowing, pain when chewing, a white patch anywhere on the inside of your mouth, a lump or sore in the mouth or on the lip that does not heal.

If you notice any of these symptoms, ask your dentist or doctor about it.

Treatment includes surgery for early or low-volume late stage lesions and radiation or chemoradiation for more advanced cancers.

#### More information

- [Importance of HPV Vaccine](#)

Rush is a not-for-profit health care, education and research enterprise comprising Rush University Medical Center, Rush University, Rush Oak Park Hospital and Rush Health.

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