



Rutland Regional Medical Center

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Head & Neck Cancers Caused by HPV

By David Charnock

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS or HPV (the wart virus) ASSOCIATED WITH OROPHARYNGEAL HEAD AND NECK CANCER.

Currently, there are over 200 different kinds of HPV, (human papillomaviruses) identified. Some of them have been designated as high risk due to their potential to cause cancer. Of these, two high risk types are HPV-16 and HPV-18. These HPVs can cause both cervical cancer in females and oral throat cancer in males and females.

Interestingly, as the rates of cervical cancer are decreasing, the rates of oropharyngeal cancer caused by HPV are increasing. The HPVs tend to infect the skin and mucous membranes of the body most commonly causing warts. These viruses can be transmitted through sexual contact. Persistent infections of these high-risk types of HPVs can progress to cancer. However, most infections do not cause cancer. Most HPV infections are temporary and have little long-term significance. HPV type 16 is associated with HPV positive oropharyngeal throat cancers of the head and neck. Additionally, HPV type 6 and 11 can cause respiratory papillomas or warts in the airway's voice box region in both children and adults. Most HPV infections are cleared by the body's natural immune processes. HPV infection is the most frequently sexually transmitted disease in the world. Recently, two vaccines became available to help prevent some of the high risk HPV infections. Cervarix protects against the initial infection with HPV type 16 and 18. The Gardasil vaccine protects against four of the HPV types including: 6, 11, 16, & 18. For this reason, the Gardasil vaccine is recommended both for boys and girls.

It has been estimated of those with oral throat cancer 35% have the HPV 16 virus infection.

In the United States, there are approximately 52,000 new cases of head and neck cancer per year. Although smoking related cancers of the head and neck numbers have decreased, the HPV related oropharyngeal cancers are rising. It is estimated by the year 2020, the number of HPV oral cancers will surpass the number of female cervical cancers caused by HPV. Unlike the Pap smear for cervical cancer, there is currently no direct screening test for oropharyngeal throat cancer, although there has been research of saliva testing for this virus. Viral infections causing medical problems are not unusual. For example, chickenpox virus as a child may cause shingles later in life. The good news is that patients with HPV positive oral and throat cancers have better survival rates than those without HPV caused cancers.

Dr. Oz talks about the HPV virus and oral cancer and has discussed oral cancer screening noting that early detection is important.

Some early warning signs may include:

- Red or white (leukoplakia) patch, small ulcer or nodule in your mouth
- A canker sore in your mouth that will not heal after 7 to 10 days
- Sore throat that radiates to your ear(s) and does not seem to get better
- A lump in your neck or lymph node that will not go away
- A change in your normal voice
- Hoarseness
- Swallowing difficulties or changes
- A sense of something in your throat or the feeling of a lump

An examination by an ENT (ear, nose and throat) doctor will likely include palpation (feeling/touching) of the lesions. The doctor may also use a special scope called an endoscope to try to see the lesions. Some of these oral cancers can be in hard to reach places such as in the back of your tongue.

What can you do to prevent oral cancer?

- Limit alcohol use
- Limit tobacco exposure
- Have your children vaccinated against the HPV virus

For any concerns or questions, please contact your healthcare provider or Rutland ENT & Audiology at Rutland Office at 802.775.3314 or Dorset Office 802.366.8195

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