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A Future Without HPV-Related Cancers is Within Reach *Eliminating Cervical Cancer is the First Step*

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Commentary Overview

- Of the estimated 34,800 cancers in the United States caused by HPV between 2012 and 2016, 92 percent could have been prevented by the HPV vaccine.
- Recommendations from trusted health care providers are one of the most effective ways to increase HPV vaccine uptake.
- Along with HPV vaccination, screening and early treatment of cervical cancer should be a part of our efforts to eliminate this cancer in the U.S.
- AACI supports a call to action urging policymakers and other stakeholders to make eliminating HPV-related cancers a public health priority.

A future without cancers related to the human papillomavirus (HPV) is within reach—but to achieve this goal, health care providers must significantly increase prevention and screening efforts. That is the main takeaway of a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

According to a [study](#) published in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) last month, an estimated 34,800 cancers in the United States were caused by HPV between 2012 and 2016. **Among those cancers, 92 percent could have been prevented by the HPV vaccine.**

The CDC currently recommends that 11- and 12-year-olds receive the HPV vaccine to ensure that they are protected before exposure to the virus, which can cause cancers of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, and oropharynx (the back of the throat, including the base of the tongue and tonsils). To maximize the effectiveness of the vaccine, pre-teens should receive the

second dose 6 to 12 months after the first.

However, the data show that vaccine uptake still lags behind the ideal 80-percent coverage rate. The results of the 2018 National Immunization Survey-Teen (NIS-Teen) published in the MMWR show that HPV vaccination rates increased slightly among boys, to 48.3 percent, but remained constant among girls, hovering around 54.1 percent. Only about half of eligible boys and girls are receiving the full vaccine series on time.

Vaccination and Screening: Our Best Defense

Recommendations from trusted health care providers remain one of the most effective interventions: only one in four parents who received a medical recommendation for the HPV vaccine chose not to have their child vaccinated. According to the report, health care professionals also play an important role in addressing socioeconomic disparities, since vaccination rates are lower in rural areas and differ based on insurance status. These statistics underscore the urgent need for health care practitioners to consistently recommend the HPV vaccine and reinforce the message that the vaccine is not only safe—it is effective cancer prevention.

Pre-teens aren't the only ones who benefit from HPV vaccination. Recent recommendations indicate that the vaccine may provide protection to adults up to age 45. Although vaccination is highly effective at preventing HPV infection, it is important to take a big-picture approach and employ every tool at our disposal, including evidence-based screening methods.

Because highly effective interventions exist, cervical cancer has been identified as the first HPV-related cancer to target for elimination—the reduction of new cases to near zero—in the U.S. The combination of vaccination and routine screening for early signs of cervical cancer is our best defense against this disease.

Once a leading cause of cancer deaths among women, cervical cancer is now one of the most preventable cancers, due in large part to the widespread use of Pap and HPV tests. In the U.S., the incidence of cervical cancer has been slowly declining, but incidence rates have plateaued. The U.S. [Healthy People 2020](#) goal is for 93 percent of females between the ages of 21 and 65 to be screened for cervical cancer; however, only 80 percent of eligible women currently follow this recommendation. To eliminate cervical cancer in the U.S., we must accelerate progress by ensuring that all eligible females follow cervical cancer screening guidelines.

Accelerating Progress Through Research

To make significant progress toward elimination, accurate and timely data on HPV vaccination rates and cervical cancer are needed at a more granular level than is currently available. These data will help establish a baseline to inform targets for intervention, track progress, and demonstrate vaccine effectiveness.

Further research is needed to establish new methods to screen for HPV-related cancers and improve treatments for pre-cancerous lesions and cancers caused by HPV. Research is also needed to address specific challenges, from improving vaccination rates in rural communities to educating communities nationwide on the urgent need for vaccination, screening, and timely treatment.

To achieve elimination, the U.S. should follow the lead of the World Health Organization (WHO), which is working to define a threshold under which cervical cancer is no longer a public health concern and set short-term milestones toward elimination.

The WHO has identified key targets that put countries on a trajectory toward achieving the elimination of cervical cancer. These targets have proven beneficial and cost-effective in both low- and high-resource settings and align with the following Healthy People 2020 goals:

- Complete vaccination of more than 80 percent of males and females ages 13-15 by 2020
- Screen 93 percent of age-eligible females for cervical cancer by 2020
- Provide prompt follow-up and proper treatment of females who screen positive for high grade cervical pre-cancerous lesions

An Unprecedented Opportunity

AACI is among more than 70 leading public health organizations, patient advocates, and cancer centers that endorsed a [call to action](#) urging policymakers and other stakeholders to make strides toward eliminating cervical cancer and other cancers caused by HPV in the U.S.

For the first time in history, we have the opportunity to eliminate up to six cancers affecting men and women, beginning with cervical cancer. It is imperative that cervical cancer elimination is included as a national public health priority in the Healthy People 2030 goals. By galvanizing organizations and providers nationwide to coordinate prevention, screening, and early treatment activities, the U.S. can make measurable progress toward eliminating HPV-related cancers in the next decade.

[View the Call to Action](#)

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