

Tulane Head & Neck Experts Lead Call for HPV Vaccines

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Human papillomavirus (HPV) has long been known as a cause for cervical cancer, but otolaryngologists are seeing a marked increase of head and neck cancers caused by HPV. From 1984 to 2004, the rate of HPV-positive oropharyngeal squamous cell carcinoma, a type of head and neck cancer, increased 225 percent. By 2020, the number of HPV head and neck cancers is expected to surpass those of cervical cancers.

Dr. Paul Friedlander, chairman of the Department of Otolaryngology at Tulane University School of Medicine has treated patients as young as their mid-30s with HPV-related malignancies. He and a team of Tulane-based researchers are leading a

call for ear, nose and throat doctors (Otolaryngologists) to support a preventative strategy — HPV vaccination. Their opinion is published in JAMA Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery.

The HPV vaccine has been available for more than ten years. Unfortunately, in the United States vaccination rates are still low. In 2016, only 60 percent of U.S. teens received one or more doses of the HPV vaccine, compared with 88 percent receiving the recommended vaccination for tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis.

The Tulane team is promoting a two-prong approach to encourage HPV vaccinations. The initial thrust is a community based educational platform stressing the role of cancer prevention through HPV vaccination. The second prong is advocacy for policy change at a national level.

“We want people to get vaccinated before they’re exposed to the virus,” says Friedlander. “Otolaryngologists should be actively engaged in promoting cancer vaccinations.”

Friedlander says otolaryngologists should talk to their young patients about the HPV vaccine. The CDC recommends the shots for all kids ages 11 or 12 years old. The vaccine is also recommended for women through age 26 and men age 21.

He says ENTs should also be advocates for policy change at the national level, calling for the HPV vaccine to be included in the inoculations students must have to attend public schools.

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