

# The Role of Nursing in Preventing HPV-Related Cancers

**H**uman papillomavirus (HPV) is commonly found on the cervix. However, new sites of the virus have emerged during the past 10 years, including the oropharynx in both sexes and the anus in men. According to Senkomago et al. (2019), 34,800 cancers reported annually in the United States from 2012 to 2016 were attributable to HPV. Of these cases, 92% were attributable to types of HPV that are targeted by the 9-valent vaccine (Senkomago et al., 2019). The role of the oncology nurse in HPV prevention begins with the education of patients and their family members regarding updated vaccination information. Educating patients on the latest recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices—an arm of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—is a primary part of the oncology nurse's role in preventing HPV-related cancers (Meites et al., 2019).

About a decade ago, when I was an otolaryngology clinical nurse specialist, our practice began to see a slight increase in cases of oropharyngeal growths on the tonsillar, soft palate, tongue, and glosso-tonsillar sulci of men and women in the clinic. When these head and neck tissues, which are similar to cervix and anus tissues, were biopsied, HPV cells were detected. This was a mysterious finding, and we had to tease out if the diagnosis was squamous cell carcinoma or HPV.

Around this same time period, the first HPV vaccine was developed and introduced into clinical practice. Fear of flaws in the vaccine and uncertainty about an

individual's chances of becoming infected from the vaccine caused hesitancy in the public. This led me to dive into HPV research and look at the evidence to help educate my nursing students, peers, and the community.

public whenever possible on the importance of vaccinations in preventing cancers. In addition, to advance oropharyngeal cancer prevention, oncology nurses can join with other clinical providers to ensure diligent surveillance for HPV and

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Where I currently practice in Hawaii, the American Cancer Society recruited young adults to help us educate the target preteen audience on Maui on HPV and the HPV vaccine. This initiative was important because we discovered that many young adults use oral sex as a method to prevent pregnancy without realizing this is a high-risk behavior that can cause HPV-related cancers. It is estimated that it takes decades for HPV to present itself. Healthy People 2020 had a target of vaccinating as many as 80% of adolescents in the United States. With 2020 soon ending, that goal was a bit lofty. However, promising declines in vaccine-preventable cancers indicate significant improvement and shows signs that herd immunity may be playing a role.

Based on the latest HPV vaccination statistics (Meites et al., 2019), only half of U.S. adolescents were vaccinated against HPV in 2018. As oncology nurses interested in cancer prevention, it is incumbent on us to stay abreast of changes regarding HPV and clearly educate the

to promote the use of vaccination for prevention.



**Celeste M. Baldwin, PhD, APRN, CNS,**

is an adjunct graduate nursing faculty member for the DNP program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and at Regis College in Boston, MA. Baldwin

can be reached at celbald@gmail.com, with copy to CJONeditor@ons.org.

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## KEYWORDS

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