

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) Affects More Than 20 Million Americans

The human papilloma virus (HPV) affects over 20 million Americans. As the most common sexually transmitted infection, with over 120 identified subtypes, over 50% of adults will be infected with the virus at some point during their lives. While HPV is responsible for warts, including oral and genital warts, more worrisome is the virus' role in the creation of cancer. Certain subtypes of HPV have long been implicated in cervical cancer, however more recently, the virus has been linked to cancers of the back of the mouth and throat, or oropharynx. The anatomical structures most commonly involved in this area include the tonsils and the base of the tongue.



Photo courtesy of SUNY Downstate

Dr. Krishnamurthi Sundaram, MD FACS

While cancers of the mouth and throat have traditionally been linked to abuse of tobacco and alcohol products, as smoking rates decrease and HPV infection rates increase, a rapidly growing portion of recently diagnosed oropharyngeal cancers are caused by HPV. This is not to say that there was any confusion regarding the role of tobacco and alcohol in head and neck cancer, rather, HPV-related oropharyngeal cancer represents a distinct clinical entity, with features that distinguish it from smoking-related cancer.

Patients with HPV-related cancer of the oropharynx are generally younger than their smoker counterparts (40's and 50's). On average, they come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and they may have never smoked a cigarette in their lifetime. Risk factors include patients with higher numbers of lifetime oral sex partners (greater than 5) and higher vaginal sex lifetime partners (greater than 25). Luckily, while the rate of HPV related head and neck cancer has been increasing, survival in this patient population is better than that seen in the smoking-induced population.

Most people infected with HPV have no symptoms. Only 1% of HPV infections involve the subtype that causes cancer and, in greater than 90% of cases, the body's immune system will eradicate the virus naturally. In the remaining cases, the development of cancer usually requires 20 or more years. There are currently no screening tests approved for early detection of HPV-related throat cancer and once infected; there is no treatment for the virus. For those who have not yet contracted HPV, Gardasil and Cervarix represent the current FDA approved vaccines and are recommended prior to the start of sexual activity. Protection is expected to last about 5 years.

Patients who are diagnosed with HPV-related throat cancer commonly complain of a mass felt or seen in the neck, a sore throat that will not go away, a visible irregularity seen in the mouth (such as a tonsil on one side that is much bigger than the other), problems with swallowing, or a lump in the throat. A comprehensive physical examination and biopsy, if needed, by an otolaryngologist (ears nose and throat specialist) is essential to establish the diagnosis.

At University Physicians of Brooklyn Ears Nose and Throat you will see the specialist you need to investigate any symptoms or concerns you may have regarding cancer of the throat, head and neck.

Dr. Krishnamurthi Sundaram is Board certified in Otolaryngology and has advanced training in Head and Neck Surgery. He is a Clinical Professor of Otolaryngology at SUNY Downstate Medical Center and sees patients at 470 Clarkson Ave., Suite H, Brooklyn, NY 11203 (718-270-4701) and 376 Sixth Ave, Brooklyn, NY 11215 (718-499-0940).

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