

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Vaccines and Knowledge: Silent Guardians Against HPV

What We Know About HPV and What We Need to Know About HPV

To the OFP Editor:

Student Doctors Anna-Taylor Harbin and Alexa Lane provided a useful overview of human papillomavirus in the OFP Patient Education Handout (published in the Fall 2024 issue). They also raised some important questions concerning HPV for family physicians.

Which HPV-related cancers can be screened for? While the authors argue that cervical cancer is the only HPV-related cancer that can be screened for, and it is currently the only HPV cancer screening included in the preventive medicine guidelines, there are other HPV-related cancers that should be screened for in high-risk populations.

There is a screening method for HPV-related rectal cancer called the anal Pap smear (also known as anal cytology or anal rectal cytology (ARC)).¹ This test involves collecting cells from the anus using a swab, like a cervical Pap test. The collected cells are then examined under a microscope for abnormalities that could indicate precancerous changes or cancer.²

If abnormal cells are detected, further tests, such as a digital anal rectal examination (DARE) or high-resolution anoscopy, may be recommended to examine the anal canal more closely and potentially treat any precancerous lesions.

Esophageal cancer from HPV virus can also be tested for by esophagoscopy and biopsy.³ While the test is too intrusive to be a screening test for the public, there are times when this should be pursued.⁴

Noting that we do not treat men who have HPV, even though HPV is associated with penile cancers in men,⁵ raises more questions.⁶ And the issue of whether HPV infection is sexually transmitted or sexually activated is one that our patients will ask about and could direct future research.⁷⁻⁸

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SOURCES

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