

HPV Vaccination & Dentists in California

In California, there are disproportionate vaccination rates¹ among the state's counties. Specifically, there are disparate human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine rates in California, which in turn, jeopardize the health of California's most vulnerable communities.

Data shows an inverse association between vaccination rates and prevalence of HPV cancers among California counties, showing that HPV vaccines are one of the most effective ways to prevent HPV cancers.^{1,2} CDA believes dentists play an important role in reducing HPV rates through patient vaccination, counseling, and screening.

HPV-Related Cancer

Oropharyngeal cancer is now the most common cancer attributed to HPV in the United States, surpassing rates of cervical cancer recorded in 2019.⁷ Yet data has shown a constant decline in the awareness of HPV and the HPV vaccine in the United States since 2013.⁷ By increasing HPV vaccination rates, the healthcare providers, including dentists, would be able to prevent thousands of cancers. Dentists have a unique role in supporting HPV vaccination as they are often the primary detector of HPV-related oral cancers. Dentists specifically have an opportunity not only to screen, but

also educate patients on the risks of HPV oropharyngeal cancer and HPV vaccination for disease prevention.

Despite the recognized benefits of the HPV vaccine preventing multiple cancer types, California experiences alarmingly low HPV vaccination rates (less than 50%) with significant inconsistencies across its counties (ranging from 13–48%). Such low vaccination confidence and acceptance not only intensifies the potential risk of HPV-associated cancers but also aggravates health disparities within certain community subsets throughout California.

HPV Vaccine Education

Although past legislative attempts to create an HPV mandate in California have been unsuccessful, not all states with high vaccination rates have a mandate. For example, North Dakota has no required policy for HPV vaccination, yet has the highest vaccination rate in the country.⁴ This rate is largely contributed to



much of the physician workforce educating patients on HPV vaccination safety and efficacy. North Dakota measures how its people value local, trusted experts rather than implementing a vaccine mandate.⁵ Conversely, Virginia requires HPV vaccination for seventh graders in public schools, but still has a lower state-wide HPV vaccination rate when compared to North Dakota.⁶ Regardless of the policies a state decides to set, dentists have a role to support HPV vaccination through education and promotion.

HPV Vaccine Conversations

Oral HPV diagnostics should be performed during routine dental cleaning visits, as a non-invasive screening may identify persons at risk of oropharyngeal cancer. A 2023 study published in the *Journal of the American Dental Association* found conversations about HPV vaccinations are infrequent in oral health care settings even though the vaccine

could help prevent HPV-related oropharyngeal cancers that dentists are trained to screen.⁶ The effectiveness of healthcare providers recommending vaccines to patients, including the HPV vaccine, is well established. Although much of organized dentistry formally supports HPV vaccination, many dentists might not feel they have enough support to engage patients in conversations about vaccine uptake, including the HPV vaccine.

However, dentists have a unique role to talk with their patients about the importance of receiving the HPV vaccine. Patients who visit their primary care physician may have more regular contact with a dentist. Furthermore, for patients and their guardians who may be resistant to the vaccine as a result of its association with a sexually transmitted disease, their conversations with a dentist regarding the risk of oropharyngeal cancer may serve to underline the importance of the HPV vaccine as a cancer prevention tool.²

1. Warren BR, Gillette-Walch H, Adler J, et al. Assessment of human papillomavirus vaccination rates of adolescents in California, 2018–2019. *Prev Med Rep.* 2023;32. doi:10.1016/j.pmedr.2023.102144
2. Patton C V, Sawicki DS, Clark JJ. *Basic Methods of Policy Analysis and Planning*; 2015. doi:10.4324/9781315664736
3. Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation-Harvard Law School, UC Davis Health Comprehensive Cancer Center. HPV Vaccine Policy Landscape: Public Health Strategies; 2022. Accessed September 16, 2023. <https://chplpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/CHPLI-HPV-Vax-design-v9-web.pdf>
4. Griffith M. North Dakota could eradicate cervical cancer thanks to high HPV vaccination rates, health department says. *The Dickinson Press*. <https://www.thedickinsonpress.com/newsmd/north-dakota-could-eradicate-cervical-cancer-thanks-to-high-hpv-vaccination-rates-health-department-says#:~:text=BISMARCK%20%E2%80%94%20More%20than%2088%25%20of,cervical%20cancer%20among%20its%20residents.> Published May 31, 2021. Accessed September 16, 2023.
5. Campbell D. Anthropology's contribution to public health policy development. *McGill Journal of Medicine.* 2010;13(1). doi:10.26443/mjm.v13i1.239
6. <https://adanews.ada.org/ada-news/2023/january/january-jada-examines-barriers-to-hpv-related-discussions-in-dental-settings/>
7. Van Dyne EA, Henley SJ, Saraiya M. Trends in human papillomavirus-associated cancers: United States, 1999–2015. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2018;67(33):918–924.
8. Walker KK, Jackson RD, Sommariva S, Neelamegam M, Desch J. USA dental health providers' role in HPV vaccine communication and HPV-OPC protection: a systematic review. *Hum Vaccin Immunother.* 2019;15(7-8):1863–1869.
9. Villa A, Chmieliauskaite M, Patton LL. Including vaccinations in the scope of dental practice: The time has come. *J Am Dent Assoc.* 2021 Mar;152(3):184–186. doi: 10.1016/j.adaj.2020.09.025. Epub 2021 Jan 9. PMID: 33436264; PMCID: PMC7796798.