

HPV Free Idaho

By Katherine Hoyer

We all know someone who has had it. Many of us have lost a loved one to it. Some of us know a survivor. A rare encounter would be meeting someone who has never been affected by it somehow in their lifetime. Cancer. The second leading cause of death in Idaho. However, there is a cancer that is preventable and there is a way to protect your children from ever experiencing the heart wrenching diagnosis of cancer.

February is HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) Awareness Month and Panhandle Health District is working with community partners and healthcare providers to create an HPV Free Idaho. Virtually all cases of cervical cancer are caused by HPV. Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women worldwide, with over 500,000 new cases estimated each year according to the National Cancer Institute. HPV can also cause several other types of cancer, including anal, oral, vaginal, vulvar and penile cancers.

“The most important thing to know about the HPV vaccine is that it is cancer prevention,” said Erin Whitehead, staff epidemiologist and coordinator of the Comprehensive Cancer Control Program at Panhandle Health District. “It has been scientifically proven to prevent cancers associated with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). It prevents against cervical cancer and several other cancers, for example, oropharyngeal cancers. Head and neck cancers, such as these, are extremely difficult to treat and therefore have a high mortality rate.”

Cervical cancer is the easiest gynecologic cancer to prevent, with a regular Pap test and the HPV vaccine. HPV is transmitted through intimate skin-to-skin contact. Words like ‘cervical’ and ‘gynecologic’ might make you believe that this cancer only affects women, but, just like breast cancer, HPV can be diagnosed in men as well. Also alarming, in Idaho, there were more males diagnosed with HPV associated oropharyngeal cancer (a form of throat cancer) than females diagnosed with HPV associated cervical cancer according to data from the Comprehensive Cancer Control of Idaho. In fact, the Panhandle has a higher incidence rate of adults diagnosed with HPV associated cancers than the state overall.

Approximately 80% of the population will contract some strain of HPV at some point in their lives. Most people clear the virus, but not everyone. If you are sexually active, you can get HPV. Even if you have only had sex with one person, you can still get HPV and you may not develop symptoms until years after you had sex with an infected person. Unfortunately, that makes it hard to know when you became infected and how many others may have been infected.

“The most effective way to prevent this type of cancer is through vaccination,” said Whitehead. “There are many misconceptions being spread that the HPV vaccine is unsafe. The HPV vaccine is *very* safe, and probably one of *the* safest and most researched vaccines, to date.”

Facts About HPV:

- HPV can cause cancer in both men and women.
- HPV does not always show symptoms.
- The best time to have your child vaccinated is 11-12 years old.
- Catch-up vaccines are available for men through age 21 and women through age 26, if they did not get vaccinated when they were younger.
- The HPV vaccine is an inactivated (not live) vaccine.
- Most people will be exposed to HPV in their lifetime.
- Worldwide, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women.

Panhandle Health district offers the vaccine to boys and girls, age 9 to 26. In most cases, it is a two-shot series and is recommended to receive at age 11. The vaccine is free for children under the age of 19 at Panhandle Health District.

HPV vaccines are a simple and effective cancer prevention for our children. Let's work together to make an HPV Free Idaho.

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To learn more about HPV and cancer prevention visit:

www.panhandlehealthdistrict.org/comprehensive-cancer-control-and-prevention

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