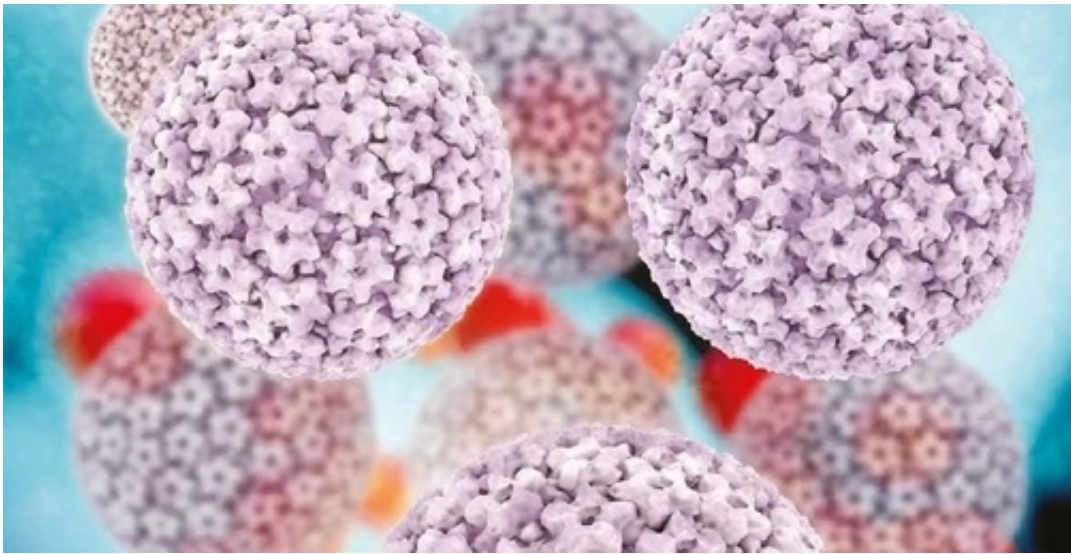


# Study examines rates of common oral infection that can cause mouth cancer

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“HPV is a very common infection, with around 80% of adults being exposed to a genital HPV infection by their mid-twenties.”—Dr Gillian Knight, Head of Biosciences. Credit: University of Derby

Researchers at the University of Derby have carried out the first pilot study in the UK looking at the rates of a common oral infection in young healthy adults which can cause cancer in the mouth.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is a common viral infection which can be passed through close contact and has high-risk strains that can lead to head and [neck](#) and cervical cancers.

The study, which questioned 124 people aged 18-24 about their lifestyle as well as involving a mouth swab, revealed 4% had a detectable oral HPV infection and indicated that possible lifestyle choices, such as smoking, could increase the risk of contracting HPV.

Dr Gillian Knight, Head of Biosciences at the University of Derby, who led the study, said: "HPV is a very common infection, with around 80% of adults being exposed to a genital HPV infection by their mid-twenties. We already know that this high infection rate influences the likelihood of women developing cervical cancer, but what we don't know is how many people who have an oral HPV infection go on to develop HPV head and neck cancer.

"In the UK, we only vaccinate 12-13 year old girls with the HPV jab to prevent them from picking up the high-risk strains of HPV when they become sexually active, which hopefully will prevent in girls all HPV-related cancers, including cervical cancer.

"We do not vaccinate boys even though they have the same risk of contracting HPV infection as women and a recently identified risk – higher than in women – to head and neck cancer. Patients presenting at head and neck clinics with HPV-associated cancers are steadily increasing, particularly in white males under the age of 40.

"The reason why men in the UK are not given the vaccine is that rates of HPV head and neck cancer are currently not as high as cervical cancer rates, but as the numbers of HPV head and neck cancer increase, there is a call that the UK follow other countries and start to vaccinate their boys."

All HPV infections are spread via touch. The types of HPV that affect the mouth and throat may also be passed on through certain behaviours such as oral sex. There are more than 100 types of HPV and most people

have the virus at some point in their lives. However, some high-risk strains can cause cancer if that person remains infected for a long time.

Cervical cancer is the most common cancer caused by HPV but the infection can also cause head and neck cancer, anal cancer, penile cancer, skin cancer and possible risk of oesophageal cancer.

Dr Knight carried out a [lifestyle](#) questionnaire among young people – a cohort established to be at high risk of contracting genital HPV infection – to establish the prevalence of the virus among young adults.

The survey focused on drinking and smoking habits, relationship status, sexual orientation and number of sexual partners.

The participants also submitted a mouth swab which was screened for HPV detection. The results showed that 4% had a detectable HPV infection – with the majority of them being smokers.

Though the number of infected individuals was small, the key findings of the [pilot study](#) align with other studies conducted within the US which indicate that oral HPV may be spread by sexual practices and that smoking can also influence oral HPV infection.

Dr Knight added: "As part of the future research at the University of Derby, we are working with the Royal Derby Hospital to investigate the rates of HPV infection in patients attending the head and neck clinics to determine the rates of oral HPV infection in a wider age range."

Provided by University of Derby

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