



April 17, 2023

Director, National Capital Area
c/o Admiral Swap
Walter Reed National Military Medical Center
8901 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20889

Dear Rear Admiral Anne M. Swap,

The Maryland Cancer Collaborative is comprised of nearly 250 individual and organization cancer stakeholders from across Maryland. We write to you with a shared mission of improving the health of our military active duty, dependents, and veterans. We believe that cancer prevention, screening, and treatment are critical components of achieving this goal, and we have developed a comprehensive cancer plan at the state level to address these issues. The Maryland Comprehensive Cancer Control Plan can be found at https://health.maryland.gov/phpa/cancer/cancerplan/SiteAssets/Pages/publications/Cancer-MD-Maryland_FINAL%20-1.pdf.

One of the key initiatives in our efforts to prevent cancer is the promotion of the Human Papillomavirus Virus (HPV) vaccination. Nationally, HPV is estimated to cause 36,000 new cases of cancer each year.¹ Despite its safety and effectiveness in preventing HPV-associated cancers, the HPV vaccine has been underutilized. Nationally, 63.8% of girls and 59.8% of boys aged 13-17 are up-to-date for the HPV vaccine and approximately 27% of men and 53.6% of women between the age of 18–26 are vaccinated.^{2,3}

Active-duty military service members and veterans are twice as likely as the general population to develop oncogenic HPV infections, resulting in a higher risk of HPV associated cancers and mortality.⁴ Unfortunately, the Department of Defense initiation rates for service members are as low as 5.8% for men and 26.6% for women.⁵ In a study of veterans 18 to 26 years of age who left the service at a young age, only 30.2% of women and 18.7% of males were vaccinated which is dramatically lower compared to the national population.⁴

¹ National Cancer Institute. HPV and Cancer. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/infectious-agents/hpv-and-cancer>.

² Center for Disease Control and Prevention. National Immunization Survey. TeenVaxView. <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/imz-managers/coverage/teenvaxview/index.html>. Accessed February 23, 2023.

³ McElfish PA, Narcisse MR, Felix HC, Cascante DC, Nagarsheth N, Teeter B, Faramawi MF. Race, Nativity, and Sex Disparities in Human Papillomavirus Vaccination among Young Adults in the USA. *J Racial Ethn Health Disparities*. 2021 Oct;8(5):1260-1266. doi: 10.1007/s40615-020-00886-5. Epub 2020 Oct 8. PMID: 33033889; PMCID: PMC9753349.

⁴ Chidambaram S, Chang S, Sandulache VC, Mazul AL, Zevallos JP. Human Papillomavirus Vaccination Prevalence and Disproportionate Cancer Burden among US Veterans. *JAMA Oncol*. Published online March 02, 2023. doi:10.1001/jamaoncol.2022.7944

⁵ Clark LL, Stahlman S, Taubman SB. Human papillomavirus vaccine initiation, coverage, and completion rates among U.S. active component service members, 2007-2017. *MSMR*. 2018 Sep;25(9):9-14. PMID: 30272988.

⁶ O'Leary ST. Why the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends initiating HPV vaccine at age 9. *Hum Vaccin Immunother*. 2022 Nov 30;18(6):2146434. doi: 10.1080/21645515.2022.2146434. Epub 2022 Nov 20. PMID: 36404635; PMCID: PMC9746363.



We need to address the public health issue of vaccination against HPV, and Maryland has joined a multi-state Call-to-Action to increase HPV vaccination.

Despite the HPV vaccine being a covered benefit, we are surprised to learn that this vaccine is not widely encouraged or supported within the military and VHA through proactive education and outreach.

As leaders of cancer prevention and care, we ask for your support to improve HPV vaccinations for our service members and their families.

Our service members have made incredible sacrifices to protect our country, and it is our duty to protect their health in return. To that end, we urge the National Capital Region to proactively improve HPV vaccination rates by implementing the following measures and encouraging the Department of Defense (DOD) to do the same throughout the country:

- Create a plan to improve HPV vaccinations for our male and female service members and their families with a focus on the 18–26 year population and shared clinical decision making for 27-45 year of age.
- Encourage vaccinations for all dependents and beneficiaries starting at age 9. Starting at age 9 for pediatrics has been shown to increase vaccine completion by 22 times by age 15.⁶
- Offer HPV vaccines at all accession points for both officer and enlisted personnel.
- Provide in-person and online education on the importance of HPV vaccines to all service members and encourage vaccination until they receive the vaccine or are no longer eligible.
- Track the vaccination status of all service members, family members, and beneficiaries to ensure they are offered the vaccine and encouraged to complete the series. Track vaccination initiation and completion as a leadership goal.
- Monitor the region's progress towards the Healthy People goal for HPV vaccine completion of 80% and encourage the DOD to do the same.
- Add the HPV vaccine to the Periodic Health Assessment in the Defense Health Agency and provide education to those who have not yet completed the series.
- Ask about the HPV vaccine at medical visits, like all ACIP recommended vaccines.

We believe that by working together, we can ensure that our military and veteran communities are protected against cancer. We are ready and willing to answer any questions or provide assistance in any way possible. If you have any questions please contact Brian Mattingly, Director of the Maryland Comprehensive Cancer Control Program, at brian.mattingly@maryland.gov.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Niharika Khanna".

Niharika Khanna, MD, MBBS, DGO
Chair
Maryland Cancer Collaborative