Missed opportunities for catch-up human papillomavirus vaccination among university undergraduates: Identifying health decision-making behaviors and uptake barriers

Kathleen R. Ragan, Robert A. Bednarczyk, Scott M. Butler, Saad B. Omer

Department of Epidemiology, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA
Hubert Department of Global Health, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA
Cancer Prevention and Control Program, Winship Cancer Institute, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA
Emory Vaccine Center, Atlanta, GA 30329, USA
School of Health and Human Performance, Georgia College, Milledgeville, GA 31061, USA
Department of Pediatrics, School of Medicine, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322, USA

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Abstract

Background: Suboptimal adolescent human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine rates in the US highlight the need for catch-up vaccination. When teenagers enter college, there may be a shift in healthcare decision-making from parents and guardians to the students themselves. Little is known about factors influencing college students’ healthcare decision-making processes.

Study design: We evaluated HPV vaccine decision-making among 18-to-26-year-old college students through a self-administered, anonymous, cross-sectional survey. This survey was distributed to a sample of men and women in classroom settings at two universities. Categorical data comparisons were conducted using Chi-square and Fisher’s exact tests. Multivariate Poisson regression was used to model initiation of HPV vaccine and compute prevalence ratios while controlling for key influential covariates at the 0.05 alpha level.

Results: A total of 527 students participated (response proportion = 93.1%). Overall, 55.8% of participants received the HPV vaccine. Encouraging conversations with doctors and/or parents/guardians were identified as one of the most influential factors to increase vaccine uptake. Among students who received encouragement from both a doctor and parent, 95.8% received the vaccine. Campaigns about cancer prevention were viewed as more influential than those that focus on preventing genital warts. Approximately one-third of students indicated they didn’t know where to get the HPV vaccine.

Women were more likely to report that their parents would not let them get the HPV vaccine compared to men (26.7% vs. 2.3%). The majority of students (77.3%) indicated their parents were sometimes, equally, or mostly involved in making decisions about receiving vaccines (other than flu).

Conclusion: Students’ decision-making is greatly influenced by their parents; therefore, interventions for this population should work to increase students’ control over decision-making while also addressing parental concerns.

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1. Introduction

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection with about 79 million Americans currently infected [1]. Half of US adolescents and young women acquire HPV within 3 years of first sexual intercourse [2,3]. HPV can cause genital warts and cervical, vulvar, vaginal, penile, anal, and oropharyngeal cancers, which contribute nearly 5% of all cancers in the US [4]. HPV vaccines are recommended for males and females from age 11 or 12 through age 26 [5].

Adolescent HPV vaccine coverage in the US is much lower than coverage for other recommended vaccines, including tetanus-diphtheria-acellular pertussis [Tdap] and meningococcal conjugate vaccine [MenACWY] [6]. In 2015, coverage with ≥1 HPV vaccine dose was 63% among females and 50% among males [6]. HPV
vaccine coverage in the US lags that of other countries, with >1
dose coverage of 86% among females and 79% among males in Aus-
tralia [7] and three-dose coverage of 86% among females in the
United Kingdom [8]. Low HPV vaccination rates highlight the need
for effective catch-up vaccination strategies for individuals over
age 13, outside of the primary recommended schedule. Sexual
onset and activity often increases once teenagers enter college
which places them at higher risk for acquiring HPV [9]. Since vac-
cine introduction, 4vHPV prevalence among US women ages 20–24
decreased to about 7%, and research suggests that catch-up vacci-
nation programs can be cost-effective and beneficial [10–13]. How-
ever, while some colleges offer HPV vaccine, active catch-up
campaigns are not as common as promotion activities for younger
adolescents.

Many studies have sought to identify correlates of HPV vaccina-
tion and predict behaviors by focusing on established constructs
and exploring vaccine knowledge, attitudes, practices, acceptance,
and uptake among college students [13–19]. Studies exploring par-
etial and/or physician attitudes and knowledge have identified
physician recommendation and parental approval as strong predic-
tors of vaccine uptake, however, many studies have focused only
on adolescent females [13,16,20–24]. Although some barriers to
HPV vaccination have been identified, research on the level of
autonomy and control over decision-making among young adults
is still limited. When teens enter college, many move away from
their parents/guardians who may have had roles in influencing
their healthcare decisions. Determining which modifiable or influ-
encing factors lead some young adults to get vaccinated is a sizable
gap in current literature [22]. Given that the HPV vaccine is avail-
able at about 72% of college and university health centers nation-
wide, often at reduced cost or for free depending on students' insur-
ance, it is important to understand why students choose not
to receive the vaccine to develop catch-up vaccination programs
to address barriers and increase vaccine uptake [25].

We sought to identify key barriers, influencing factors, and mes-
sage framing preferences regarding the HPV vaccine decision-
making process among 18-to-26-year-old college students. We
assessed the rationale for students’ HPV vaccine status, especially
among those who recently entered college and were unvaccinated.
Identifying when this population begins to take control of their
own decision-making and the extent to which they rely on others
to influence these decisions is crucial for effective public health
interventions.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Survey

This cross-sectional study utilized a self-administered HPV Vac-
cine and Decision-Making Behaviors Survey in classroom settings
at two universities. Each university’s Institutional Review Board
approved the survey, and data collection occurred between Octo-
ber and November 2014. The survey was anonymous and no per-
sonally identifiable information was collected. As written
documentation of consent would have compromised confidential-
ity by allowing responses to be traced back to students, we
acquired a waiver of signed informed consent. Study participants
did not receive any school credit and were not monetarily compen-
sated. Participants received a stress ball as a thank you gift for
assisting with the study.

Questionnaire items were adapted from previous research and
validated instruments on health decision-making, vaccine behav-
ior, and message framing and guided by the Health Belief Model,
the Transtheoretical Model, and the Theory of Planned Behavior
[15,26–34]. The 50 item questionnaire focused primarily on HPV
vaccination and also included items relating to personal health his-
tory and behaviors (including vaccination history), sexual health
history and behaviors, and factors associated with healthcare
decision-making. Demographic items such as class level, age, gen-
der, race/ethnicity, and income level were also included.

The questionnaire was pilot tested to ensure content was
appropriate and understandable for the target population by six
women and four men with an average age of 23 years (range:
18–27 years). Participants took an average of 15.3 min to complete
the questionnaire (range: 10.5–21 min). Participant feedback was
very positive with only minor changes requested. Subject matter
experts also reviewed the questionnaire to further support face
validity of survey items. No survey data was collected from pilot
test participants.

2.2. Study population and recruitment

The study population primarily consisted of undergraduates
(99.4%) at an urban private religious-affiliated or a rural public uni-
versity in Georgia. To be included in the study, participants had to
be at least 18 years of age, a currently enrolled student at the insti-
tution, and able to read and understand English.

After obtaining a list of courses at each university, we contacted
a sample of professors of courses with more than 50 students and
asked if they would allow time during their course for students to
complete the questionnaire. Enrollment was not limited to a speci-
fic ethnic or racial group, and there were no plans to monitor equi-
table recruitment of subjects. During regularly scheduled class
times, research personnel verbally described informed consent
guidelines (paper copies were also distributed), distributed surveys
to students, and promptly collected them via a drop box. To inves-
tigate the continuum of decision-making practices from teens to
young adults, we targeted introductory level courses selected from
a variety of subjects including mathematics, linguistics, sociology,
psychology, biology, religion, and political science.

2.3. Statistical analysis

The total number of completed surveys needed was 402 based
on computations utilizing a response proportion of 50% with a
95% confidence interval (CI) of ±5% with 80% power [35]. Since
the most conservative response proportion of 50% was used, a sam-
ple size of 402 was sufficient to evaluate any response proportion
more extreme than 50%.

Data was entered into and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics
for Windows, Version 22.0 (Armonk, NY) and SAS 9.4 (SAS Insti-
tute, Cary NC). Categorical data comparisons were conducted using
Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests. Multivariate Poisson regression
was used to model initiation of HPV vaccine and compute preva-
ience ratios while controlling for key influential covariates at the
0.05 alpha level [36]. Models were stratified by gender due to a pri-
ori decisions to account for initial gender-specific vaccine recom-
endations. Although good precision was achieved for a large
overall sample, stratifying by gender reduced the precision of the
CI estimates.

The primary outcome of HPV vaccine receipt was dichoto-
mously measured by participants indicating they had initiated
the vaccine series and received at least one dose (initiators) or
had not received any doses of the vaccine (non-initiators). Vaccina-
tion intentions of non-initiators were measured by participants
indicating whether they ‘plan to get,’ ‘don’t plan to get,’ or were
‘undecided’ about receiving the vaccine within the next year. As
only ten participants reported they ‘plan to get’ the vaccine, bivari-
ate comparisons of demographic and influential characteristics by
intention among non-initiators are only presented for those who
indicated ‘don’t plan to get’ or ‘undecided’.

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