News stories about HPV and cervical cancer vaccines offer a mixed bag regarding the quality and depth of information, according to recently published research.

Bridget Kelly and colleagues examined more than 300 news articles about HPV and related vaccines that ran in newspapers, broadcast networks, and the wire services. They also conducted monthly surveys throughout their study to measure how media coverage affects knowledge about HPV.

The investigators found that the public's awareness of HPV rose sharply with increased media attention to the topic. While two-thirds of stories they examined mentioned that HPV is sexually transmitted, 80% failed to discuss the need for cervical cancer screening following vaccination. Given that HPV/cervical cancer vaccines don’t block all high-risk types of the virus associated with cervical cancers, women’s health experts consider the importance of continued screening in women who receive the vaccine to be the most crucial message.

Another study found similar gaps in media reports. Researchers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reviewed 250 Internet reports on the HPV vaccine published in the first three months following the vaccine’s approval in 2006. Most articles positioned the vaccine as a cervical cancer prevention tool and discussed that HPV is sexually transmitted, but often missing was information about safety, side effects, and the vaccine’s availability as “catch-up” with women ages 13-26.

These findings are similar to those of an audit of media stories done for ASHA by PR Solutions, Inc., of Washington DC in 2007. The audit found that while information in the media about HPV and cervical cancer was largely correct, reports often failed to mention both the limitations of HPV vaccines and the need for continued Pap tests among those receiving the vaccine. With the exception of broadcast outlets, both key messages were missing in the vast majority of
coverage of cervical cancer vaccines.

Deborah Arrindell, ASHA’s vice president for health policy, says “We have an opportunity to work with medical reporters and health editors to make sure they understand the importance of telling the whole story: Cervical cancer vaccines are a wonderful tool in protecting women’s health, but continued Pap testing is imperative.”

References