

Further information

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For additional information about going for cervical screening and HPV: www.gov.uk/phe/cervical-screening-leaflet

More information is at: www.nhs.uk/cervical

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Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

A patient's guide



What is HPV?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a very common virus. Most women get it at some point of their lives.

It is likely that most of us who have ever been sexually active have had HPV at some time in our lives, although we may not have known.

It is important to note that its presence has also been demonstrated in women who have never been sexually active.

Papilloma means a growth or wart which is why HPV is also known as the 'wart virus'.

In practical terms though, only about 10% of people with HPV develop warts. There are thought to be more than 100 types of the virus that can affect the body.

About 30 types of HPV affect the genital area. It is these types that cause changes in cervical cells that can lead into cervical cancer, but most HPV infections cause no symptoms and go away on their own.

How is the virus spread?

The majority of sexually active men and women will come into contact with HPV at some point in their lives and will spontaneously clear the virus from their bodies within a few months (as happens with other viruses like those for cold and flu). Genital HPV is passed on during sexual contact, including vaginal and anal sex, oral sex and less risky with non-penetrative sex.

Is there anything I can do to get rid of the virus?

Stop smoking

Women who smoke are around twice as likely to develop cervical abnormalities as non-smokers and they are less able to get rid of the HPV infection from the body, which can develop into cancer. This is because smoking suppresses the immune system, allowing the persistence of HPV infection. Stopping smoking appears to help the abnormalities return to normal. You can be referred to smoking cessation advisor or through your GP or your local chemist if are intending to stop smoking.

Immune system

Leading a healthy lifestyle with healthy diet helps your body's natural defence stay strong against disease. A weakened immune system will not be as effective at clearing the viruses which could mean your risk of cervical abnormalities is higher than average. Women who are immunosuppressed (such as taking immunosuppressed drugs, following organ transplant or who are HIV positive) may be at a greater risk of developing abnormalities.

Remember:

- HPV is a very common virus
- Cervical cancer is a very rare disease
- If cell abnormalities are detected early then treatment is 95% successful.
- You are not alone. Up to three quarters of the population will at some point have an active HPV infection. For most people it is a minor problem.
- If you have HPV the risk of cervical cancer increases if you smoke.

What is the role of HPV in the development of cervical cancer?

A small minority of women will not clear the virus and will have a higher than normal risk of developing cervical abnormalities. Some specific HPV infections can cause changes to the cell on the cervix creating abnormalities which can be detected by cervical screening tests.

Persistent infection with HPV can lead to cell changes which, if left untreated, could develop into cervical cancer, although this will usually take several years. Regular cervical screening is the best way to identify abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix at an early stage as it saves the lives of around 4,500 women per year in the UK.

Most types of HPV that cause cervical changes are not the ones that cause visible warts. Often the HPV infection is cleared within two years and it is only when it persists in a small number of women that this may develop into pre—cancerous cells called Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN).

It is important to remember that very few women with these changes go on to have cervical cancer. It is not clear why persistent HPV infection causes more problems in some women than in others.

Is it possible to test for HPV?

Yes, a special test can detect the presence of high-risk types of HPV even before there are any visible changes to the cells of the cervix, ensuring women at risk of cervical cancer can be identified much earlier.

A positive HPV test does not mean that you will develop cervical cancer, but it does provide additional information about potential risk to your health and enable your doctor to monitor you closely.

Any signs of developing disease can therefore be detected earlier, enabling effective treatment. It also means that if you have a negative HPV test result, you then have the reassurance of knowing that your chance of developing cervical cancer is negligible.

Equally important, the HPV test can provide additional information regarding the significance of any abnormalities detected on your Pap smear.

It has been well documented that the majority of abnormalities disappear on their own, but until now there has been no method to distinguish which will regress and which will progress to a more serious disease.

HPV testing can provide this information, particularly with regard to low-grade abnormalities of which more than 97 per cent will go away on their own if HPV negative. This information can be particularly helpful to your doctor and very reassuring to you.

A negative Pap smear result combined with a negative HPV result means that you can be 99% sure that you will not develop cervical cancer disease within the next five years.

HPV infection is considered to be a normal consequence of having sex. This is true whether they are heterosexual or same sex relationships. There is no blame to attach to your current partner or any other partner or to yourself.

Is there any treatment?

There is no reliable treatment to get rid of the virus, but since in most women it disappears spontaneously over time, a “wait and see” policy is the usual management.

How is the HPV specimen collected for testing?

The specimen is collected in the same way as for the Pap smear – via sample of cells taken from the cervix. The sample is then placed into a liquid collection medium for transport into the laboratory for testing.

The HPV test provides us with more information so the correct management plan can be organised for you. There is no reliable treatment to get rid of the virus. Smoking has a significant impact on the body’s natural immune system: therefore you are less likely to get rid of the virus if you smoke.

How long might I have had the infection?

This is an impossible question to answer since the virus can remain in your body without harm for considerable periods of time or be quickly dealt with by your immune system.

Should we practice safe sex or use barrier method of contraception?

Correct and consistent use of male or female condoms would appear to be a sensible precaution. The virus might, however, have been present for some time before its detection and thereby passed on before condoms were used so it is difficult to give specific advice about this. Some people acquire the virus and never show its presence, developing a kind of immunity. Others harbour it for short or long periods of time without its presence being detected. The presence of HPV is not a contraindication to become pregnant.

Questions from partners:

Should they see a doctor or attend a GUM clinic?

If your partner is worried about you having HPV found in screening, they may wish to visit their GP or Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic for a further explanation and/or examination

Can your partner be tested for HPV?

At present there is no reliable test to demonstrate the presence of the virus available in the NHS.

Can your partner be treated?

This is unnecessary unless the virus projects into clinical warts (growths), which project above the surrounding skin