

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a question, compliment, comment or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or whh-tr.whitthealthPALS@nhs.net

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Date published: 13/06/2017
Review date: 13/06/2019
Ref: WH/Obs&Gynae/HPV/02

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Human Papilloma Virus

(HPV)

A patient's guide



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What is HPV?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection in the UK.

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 ladies 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?

Genital HPV is passed on during sexual contact, including vaginal and anal sex, oral sex and while less risky, non-penetrative sex.

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

Stop smoking. If a non-smoker, there is a tenuous evidence that a healthy diet with antioxidants, green vegetables and fruit can boost the local immunity.

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.

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

Most people come into contact with HPV at some time 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).

However, a small minority of women will not clear the virus and will have a higher than normal risk of developing cervical abnormalities. Persistent infection with HPV can lead to cell changes which, if left untreated, could develop into cervical cancer.

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.

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.

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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.

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.

Does smoking have an effect on the HPV?

Smoking has a significant impact on the bodies natural immune system, therefore you are less likely to get rid of the virus and at a higher risk of developing pre-cancerous changes which may progress into cervical cancer over a period of time.

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.

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 5 years



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