



Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Information for patients

What is HPV?

- The human papilloma virus (HPV) is a very common virus. HPV can be easily passed on during any sexual activities between partners.
- Most people who have been sexually active will have had the HPV at some time in their lives, although they may not have known it.
- **It is important to note** that HPV can also be present in women and people with a cervix (neck of the womb), **who have never been sexually active**.
- Papilloma means a growth or wart: this is why HPV is also known as the 'wart virus'.
- 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 to cervical cancer, but most HPV infections cause no symptoms and go away on their own.

How is the virus spread?

- Most sexually active people will come into contact with HPV at some point in their lives.
- In most cases, the body will clear the virus on its own, like it does with other viruses for example, cold and flu.
- Genital HPV is passed on during sexual activities, including vaginal, anal and oral sex and is less risky with non-penetrative sex (touching - either giving or receiving directly or through the clothing - of the genitalia, anus, groin, breast, inner thigh, or buttocks).

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. This test ensures that women and people with a cervix 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 give us additional information about potential risks to your health and means that your Doctor can monitor you closely.
- This means that any signs of developing disease can be identified earlier, and that we can treat that disease effectively. It also means that if you have a negative HPV test result, you know that your risk of developing cervical cancer is low.



- The HPV test can also provide extra information about any abnormalities found on your cervical screening test (smear test). A negative (no abnormalities found) cervical screening test result, alongside a negative HPV result means that you can be 99% sure that you will not develop cervical cancer disease within the next five years.
- As we mentioned before, scientific research shows us that most abnormalities disappear on their own. What we still don't know is how to tell which abnormalities will disappear, and which will develop into something more serious.
- HPV testing can provide this information, particularly with regards to less serious abnormalities of which more than 97% will go away on their own. Again, this is important for your doctor to know.
- **HPV infection is often a normal consequence of having sex. This is true whether you are in a heterosexual (straight) or in a same sex relationship. No one is to blame.**

Is there any treatment?

- There is no reliable treatment to get rid of the virus as it usually clears up by itself. A “wait and see” policy is the usual way to manage it.

How is the HPV specimen collected for testing?

- The specimen is collected in the same way as a cervical screening smear test – a sample of cells is taken from the cervix. The sample is then sent to a laboratory for testing.

How long might I have had the infection?

- This is an impossible question to answer because the virus can remain in your body without harming you for long periods of time or is quickly dealt with by your immune system.

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

- Regularly using barrier contraception, like condoms, is the best option to choose to protect yourself from HPV.
- You or your partner may have had the virus for some time before it was identified and could have passed it on before condoms were used, so it is difficult to give advice about this.
- Some people carry the virus, for short or long periods, and it never shows itself. Their bodies develop a kind of immunity.
- Having HPV will not stop a woman or person with a cervix from becoming pregnant.



Questions from partners

- **Should they see a doctor or attend a Sexual Health/Genito-Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic?**
If your partner is worried about you having HPV found in your screening, they may wish to visit their GP or Sexual Health/GUM clinic to talk to someone and/or be examined.
- **Can your male partner be tested for HPV?**
At present there is no reliable test to identify the presence of the virus in men available on the NHS.
- **Can your male partner be treated?**
This is unnecessary unless the virus turns into clinical warts (growths), which spread around the surrounding skin.

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

- A small minority of people are unable to clear the virus from their bodies and will have a higher-than-normal risk of developing cervical abnormalities.
- Some specific HPV infections can cause changes to the cells on the cervix creating abnormalities which can be detected by cervical screening tests.
- **Frequent infection with HPV can lead to cell changes** which, if left untreated, could develop into cervical cancer. This will usually take several years.
- Regular cervical screening testing is the best way to identify abnormal changes in the cells of the cervix. The screening will catch it at an early stage. It is estimated to have saved the lives of around 4,500 people every 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 continues that it can develop into pre-cancerous cells. These are called Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN).**

It is important to remember that very few people who experience these changes go on to have cervical cancer. It is not clear why continual HPV infection causes more problems for some and not for others.



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

Stop smoking

- People who smoke are 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 affects the body's natural immune system. This means that you are less likely to get rid of the virus if you smoke.
- Stopping smoking appears to help the abnormalities return to normal.
- You can be referred to a smoking cessation (stop smoking) advisor or through your GP or your local chemist if you are intending to stop smoking.

Immune system

- A healthy lifestyle with a healthy diet helps your body's natural defence to stay strong against disease.
- A weakened immune system cannot clear viruses very well and this means that your risk of cervical abnormalities is higher than average.
- People who are immunosuppressed (such as taking immunosuppressant drugs, following organ transplant or who are HIV positive) may be at a greater risk of developing abnormalities.

Things to 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.

Further information

- **Colposcopy Nurses Line:** 020 7288 3138 (leave a message)
- **Information about going for cervical screening and HPV**

www.gov.uk/phe/cervical-screening-leaflet

www.nhs.uk/cervical



Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

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

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please email whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net. We will try our best to meet your needs.

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