

HPV: Frequently Asked Questions

What is the NHS Cervical Screening

Programme?

The Cervical Screening Programme aims to reduce the number of women who develop invasive cervical cancer and the number of women who die from it. It does this by regularly screening women between the ages of 25 and 64, so that cell changes in the cervix that might otherwise develop into invasive cancer can be identified and treated. HPV testing helps to do this even more effectively.

What is HPV?

HPV stands for Human Papilloma Virus. It is a very common infection there are over 100 different types and most women get it at some time in their life. In most cases it clears up by itself without the need for treatment. Around 40 types of HPV affect the genital area and these are divided into high risk type (HR HPV) and low risk type (LR HPV).

Some of these sub-types can contribute to changes in the cells of the cervix.

Women with these changes can progress to cervical cancer. It is not clear why persistent HPV infection causes more problems in some women than in others. However other factors can increase the risk of cervical cancer; these include smoking, having a weak immune system, first intercourse at an early age, having multiple partners or having intercourse with a partner who has had multiple partners.

How do people get HPV?

HPV is a very common infection among people who have been sexually active at some time^[SEP] in their life. It is easily transmitted during sex between men and women and between partners of the same sex. The virus shows no symptoms, so it is possible that someone may have had the infection for many years without knowing about it

A partner may have been infected years earlier and, again, be unaware of it.

HPV alone on the cervix cannot be actively treated because it is a virus, not bacteria, and will therefore not respond to antibiotics. Whilst CIN is easily treated, at present there is no specific treatment for HPV itself.

Who can get HPV?

The majority of sexually active men and women will come into contact with HPV at some point in their life. 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. Estimates suggest that between 50-79% of all women who have had sexual intercourse will become infected with one or more of the HPV types.

HPV is transmitted primarily by skin to skin contact (genital to genital, anal intercourse and oral sex). The time from exposure of the virus to the development of warts or cervical changes is highly variable. Therefore it is usually impossible to identify from whom the virus was contracted, as the virus can remain dormant in some people for many years. Having HPV is not an indication of having multiple partners or being in an unfaithful relationship. There are no symptoms associated with HPV infections that cause pre-cancerous abnormalities on the cervix in women or on the man's penis. However it is possible for genital HPV to be transmitted via skin contact throughout an individual's lifetime, although this may never cause a visible problem. These different types of non- cancerous strains of HPV can appear on the hands and feet (verruca and warts) and the virus can also affect the penis, scrotum, anus and rectum causing genital warts).

In most women, their body's own immune system will get rid of the infection without them ever knowing it was there. The infection is often short lived and it is only when it becomes persistent (which occurs in a small minority of women) that cervical abnormalities can develop. The presence of HR HPV can now be detected in women who attend for cervical smear tests.

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HPV vaccination

The HPV vaccine in the UK is currently offered to all girls aged 12 to 13 years of age, in year 8 at school. This vaccine provides protection against the two high risk types of HPV (types 16 and 18) that cause over 70% of all cervical cancers, as well as two other types of HPV that cause genital warts. The aim is to administer the vaccine before they commence sexual activity so as to get the most benefit, before they become infected by the strains of HPV.

When would women be tested for HPV?

According to the National Cervical Screening Programme, an HPV test is done in the following circumstances:

- 1) To triage women who have negative/borderline/mild smear. If they are negative for HPV, the woman will only need a smear in 3-5 years' time, dependant on age. If the woman is positive for high risk HPV, there is a 1 in 5 chance that she will have an abnormality significant enough to need treatment. These women are followed up more frequently in colposcopy until they are negative for HPV.
- 2) Women who have received treatment for abnormal smears are also followed up in colposcopy to check whether they have cleared HPV after their treatment.

Is it normal to feel emotional or upset about having HPV?

Some people do feel very upset. Women who have been told they have HPV frequently express surprise, anxiety and uncertainty about the link to cancer and the stigma of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These feelings of guilt and shame are often centred around the transmission of the virus and potential effect on their partner. Often women feel angry at their sexual partner(s), even though it is not possible to know exactly when or from whom the virus was spread. Though HPV is sexually transmitted it is not treated as a sexually transmitted disease as such, as it has no treatment. Women often ask if they should tell their partners. This is an individual decision and a woman should not feel under any pressure to do so. A woman's HPV status is only of relevance to her own future risk of developing cervical cancer. This is unlike the situation for STIs such as HIV, Gonorrhoea and Chlamydia when we would encourage women to tell their sexual partners as treatment can prevent further transmission.

How can I reduce the risks of having HPV infection?

Stop smoking

Women who smoke are approximately twice as likely to develop cervical abnormalities as non-smokers. This is because smoking suppresses the immune system, allowing the persistence of HPV infection. Stopping smoking appears to help the abnormalities return to normal. If you are considering stopping smoking, we can refer you to the smoking cessation service. Please ask!

Immune system

Leading a healthy lifestyle 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 (e.g. taking immunosuppressed drugs, following organ transplant or who are HIV+) may be at an increased risk of developing abnormalities.

Safe sex and condoms

Condoms offer a degree of protection against the transmission of HPV infections that cause cervical smear abnormalities. However, other types of HPV that cause genital warts can be present all over the genitalia so this protection is considered minimal. HPV that causes genital warts in men affects the skin of the penis,