

# HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) Information



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

YES. Some people feel very upset. Women who have been told they have HPV frequently express surprise and anxiety about the link to cancer and the stigma of sexually transmitted infections (STI's). They can feel angry at their sexual partner(s), even though it is not possible to know exactly when or from whom the virus was spread. These feelings of guilt and shame are closely linked to concerns about transmission.

## Points to remember

- HPV is a normal occurrence of intercourse.
- In most women, HPV will cause no long term harm and will be eradicated by the immune system.
- The HPV that causes genital warts, is a low risk type and unlikely to cause cancer.
- If you have HPV the risk of cervical cancer increases if you

**Smoke**

**Or**

**Have immune suppression**

- 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.

## Introduction

Following a smear test or Colposcopy examination you may have been told that you have HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) or wart virus changes on your cervix. This leaflet is designed to give you more information about what this means and why it is important to continue to have regular smears.

## What is HPV?

HPV is the name of a group of viruses that can infect the skin (causing warts and verrucas) and is a very common condition. There are over 100 different sub types. Most do not cause significant disease in humans. However, some sub-types have been confirmed as agents that can contribute to cellular changes on the cervix.

## Who gets HPV?

HPV, with or without genital warts, can infect sexually active women and men of all ages, races, social classes and sexual orientation. HPV is so common, that most sexually active people will be exposed to it at some time during their life. The virus may even have been present for some time before its detection.

Approximately 8 out of 10 adults have had the infection at some time and it rarely produces any effects but about 5 % of women will have abnormal smears and 1-2 % will develop pre-cancerous cells called Cervical Intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN). It is important to remember that very few of these women progress to cervical cancer.

## How do you get HPV?

HPV is usually spread by direct skin to skin contact during sexual intercourse, although it is not a sexually transmitted disease, it is almost a normal consequence of sex. There is no blame to attach to your current or any other partner or to yourself. Having sex just once will expose you to many of the HPV viruses, and this exposure to HPV is viewed as a normal occurrence. The only way to avoid HPV is by not having sex with anyone, or by having sex only with one

partner who has not had sex with anyone else or by having sex with one un-infected partner who has sex only with you. Condoms offer a degree of protection against the initial transmission of HPV infections. However, as HPV can be present all over the genitalia, this protection is not complete.

In some people the virus can remain in the body for a considerable period of time without causing any long term harm and can be eradicated by the immune system. However in some women it can remain dormant for many years and then be passed on unknowingly to another many years later.

## **How do you know you have HPV?**

Many people with HPV will not have obvious symptoms and will not know that they have the virus. This is because some sub types do not cause visible warts but instead go on to cause changes to the cells in the cervix, which may show up as an abnormal smear.

## **Can I have a test for HPV?**

Not at present. From studies, the vast majority of women with abnormal smears test positive for HPV in most cases. This does not help deal with the underlying abnormal cells (CIN). However there are some groups of women that may benefit. At present, there is no clear national guidance, although large studies are about to be published that may change this advice in the next few years.

## **How long before you develop symptoms?**

It can take months or even years for someone exposed to HPV to become aware of it. If you are exposed to the types that cause warts then these can appear within a few weeks but may sometimes develop months or even years later. In many people the body successfully controls the virus and it may remain dormant without causing any obvious signs. If you are exposed to the type of HPV that causes cell changes on the cervix then it may take many years for such changes to show up as an abnormal smear.

## **What treatment is there for HPV?**

Once you are exposed to the virus there is unfortunately no reliable treatment to get rid of the virus. In most women the HPV infections are cleared rapidly by the immune system, allowing the virus to disappear spontaneously, a “wait and see policy” is the usual management.

Treatment is unnecessary unless the virus develops into clinical warts (growths), which project above the surrounding skin. They can then be treated in several ways, using liquids, gels, creams, cryotherapy (freezing) or laser treatment. The actual type of treatment used will depend on the individual and you may need more than one course of treatment.

## **Does HPV cause cancer?**

A few specific types of HPV have been shown to cause changes to cells in the cervix and HPV is one of the most common causes of abnormal smears. These changes if left untreated can go on to become cancerous, although this will usually take several years. Regular smear checks can identify these changes at an early stage and mean that they can be treated before they develop any further. Most of the types of HPV that cause cervical changes are not the ones that cause visible warts. Often the HPV infection is transient and it is only when it becomes persistent, and in a small minority of women, that this may lead to CIN.

It is not certain why in some women; persistent HPV infection causes more problems than in others. There are, however, identified co-factors which increase the risk of cervical cancer. These include smoking, first intercourse at an early age, having multiple partners, or having intercourse with a male partner who has had multiple sexual partners, and people who have a suppressed immune system.