

HPV

(human papillomavirus)



About this information

This information is for anyone who wants to know more about the human papillomavirus (HPV). It includes:

- what HPV is
- types of HPV and how people get it
- how HPV is linked to cervical cancer
- tests for HPV
- ways to reduce your risk of HPV.

About HPV

HPV is the name of a common virus. It infects the skin and any moist membrane (mucosa), such as:

- the cervix
- the lining of the mouth and throat
- the vagina, vulva and anus (back passage).

HPV is usually passed on through sexual contact, which can make some people feel worried or embarrassed. But it is nothing to be ashamed of – HPV lives on our skin, so it is easy to get and difficult to completely protect against.

At some point during our lives, 8 in 10 men and women will get HPV. In most cases, your immune system will get rid of HPV without it causing any problems.

“When I realised how common HPV was, my guilt did subside. There wasn't much else I could have done to protect myself from HPV – the vaccine wasn't available when I was at school... It was just that my body didn't clear it. But what I did do was go for my cervical screening!”

Laura, a service user and Jo's volunteer

Types of HPV

We know of over 200 types of HPV. Each type has a number and different types affect different parts of the body. HPV types are usually split into:

- low-risk HPV
- high-risk HPV.

Low-risk HPV may not cause any problems or cause minor conditions like warts on your hands and feet, and genital warts. Most HPV types are low risk.

High-risk HPV is linked to some cancers. It is important to remember that if you have any type of HPV, including high-risk HPV, your body will usually get rid of it without any problems.

Genital HPV

About 40 HPV types affect the genital areas of men and women, including the:

- cervix
- anus
- vagina
- skin of the penis
- vulva and perineal skin (area outside the vagina, including the labia and the area between the opening of the vagina and anus).

HPV and cancer

About 13 HPV types are linked to cancer. These types are called high-risk HPV.

Worldwide, about 5% of all cancers are linked to the virus, including:

- anal cancer
- vaginal
- penile cancer
- vulval cancer
- mouth cancer
- some head and neck cancers, such as oropharyngeal and mouth cancer.

Having high-risk HPV does not mean you will get cancer. In most people, high-risk HPV goes away without causing any problems.

HPV symptoms

HPV has no symptoms, which means that many people may have had HPV without knowing. This can sound worrying, but remember that HPV usually goes away by itself, without causing any problems.

HPV treatment

There is no treatment for HPV itself. But there are treatments for conditions caused by HPV, including genital warts, cervical cell changes and cancer.

How people get HPV

People usually get HPV through skin-to-skin contact. For the types of HPV that affect the genitals, this includes:

- vaginal sex
- anal sex
- oral sex.

Although it is rarer, HPV can also be passed on through:

- touching in the genital area
- sharing sex toys.

Am I at risk of getting HPV?

About 8 in 10 men and women will get HPV at some point in their life. In 9 in 10 people, the immune system gets rid of the virus within 2 years.

If you have ever had any kind of sexual contact, you may have HPV. Sexual contact includes all the ways of getting HPV we mention above, not just penetrative sex.

Reducing your risk of HPV

You can't completely protect against HPV. But there are ways you can reduce your risk of getting HPV or developing a persistent infection that your immune system can't get rid of:

Try to stop smoking

In the UK, about 2 in 10 cervical cancers are linked to smoking tobacco. Smoking can make your immune system weaker, which means it is less likely to protect against disease and infection. If you get HPV, a weak immune system may not be able to get rid of it. If you want to quit smoking, the NHS has programmes to support you.

HPV vaccine

If you are eligible, think about having the HPV vaccine. The vaccine helps protect against 7 in 10 cervical cancers.

Try to have safer sex

Using condoms or dental dams help reduce your risk of getting HPV, but they do not completely protect against it. Condoms and dental dams only cover part of the genitals, but HPV lives on the skin in and around the whole genital area.

How do I get rid of HPV?

There is no treatment for HPV. Instead, your immune system will usually get rid of HPV before it causes any problems. In fact, 9 in 10 people get rid of HPV within 2 years.

If you have HIV, your immune system may be less able to get rid of HPV. You can speak with your healthcare team about having cervical screening (a smear test) once a year, outside of the national programme.

Who did I get HPV from?

You can have HPV for a long time without knowing about it, so it is difficult to know when you got HPV or who you got it from.

HPV in long-term relationships

If you have been with a long-term partner, you may worry that having HPV means they have been unfaithful. This is not true. Although your immune system usually gets rid of HPV, it can sometimes stay in your body without causing any problems or being detected with a test. This is called dormant or clinically insignificant HPV.

Sometimes dormant HPV can become active again, which means it can be detected with a test and may start causing cervical cell changes. We don't know why HPV becomes active again.

Because HPV can stay dormant in your body without being detected, it is possible that you got the virus many years – even decades – ago but never knew you had it.

We understand that this can be worrying, and you may feel nervous about talking to your partner about HPV. If you want to talk with them, it may help to have this information with you, so you can go through it together. You may also want to call our free Helpline on **0808 802 8000**, so we can talk both of you through HPV – check the opening hours at jostrust.org.uk/helpline

“When I first found out that I had cell changes and HPV, my boyfriend and I initially freaked out about it. The diagnosis made me feel vulnerable, as my own body didn't show me any signs of having HPV. It was only when I started to learn a bit more about the virus that my fears began to disappear. I've done a lot of research and have been really shocked by how little is known about HPV and how much stigma there is around it, especially when it is so common.”

Nina, a service user and Jo's volunteer

Tests for HPV

There are tests for HPV for women and people with a cervix. There are 3 main reasons why you may have a test for HPV:

- HPV primary screening
- HPV triage
- test of cure.

HPV primary screening

In England, Scotland and Wales, you will now have a test for high-risk HPV at cervical screening (a smear test). Northern Ireland will be switching to this test in the future.

Your cervical screening appointment will stay the same. The only difference is that the sample of cervical cells is tested for high-risk HPV first. The sample is only looked at for cell changes if you have high-risk HPV. This is a more effective test because it helps us identify who is at higher risk of developing cell changes or cervical cancer.

HPV triage

In Northern Ireland, a test for HPV is done if the sample of cervical cells taken during cervical screening show low-grade cell changes. This is usually called HPV triage.

If you don't have high-risk HPV, you will be invited for cervical screening every 3 or 5 years, depending on your age. This is because it is unlikely cell changes would develop into cervical cancer without high-risk HPV.

If you also have high-risk HPV, you will be referred to colposcopy. Read more about colposcopy at jostrust.org.uk/colposcopy

Once Northern Ireland switches to HPV primary screening, HPV triage will no longer be used.

Test of cure

In the UK, an HPV test is also used to show treatment for cervical cell changes has been successful. This is called test of cure. Test of cure is usually done 6 months after treatment.

If you do not have high-risk HPV, you will be invited back for cervical screening every 3 years.

If you have high-risk HPV, you will be invited to colposcopy again. Read more about colposcopy at jostrust.org.uk/colposcopy

More information and support

HPV can be a really confusing topic, so you are not alone if you feel worried or unsure about it. If you have general questions about HPV, we can help:

For emotional support, call our free Helpline on **0808 802 8000** – check the opening hours at jostrust.org.uk/helpline

If you have a question, you can submit it to our panel of experts at jostrust.org.uk/ask-expert. We cannot give you medical advice or answers about any results. In this case, it is best to speak with your GP or nurse.

If you would find it reassuring to talk with others who have had HPV, join our online forum at jostrust.org.uk/forum

Can you help Jo's reach more people?

We rely on your generous donations to help us provide free support and information to the people who need it. If you find this information helpful, please consider making a donation at jostrust.org.uk/donate

Thanks and references

Thank you to everyone affected by cervical cancer who helped us develop this booklet and who shared their stories in it.

All of our information is reviewed by experts for clinical accuracy – thanks to those who reviewed this. For references, email info@jostrust.org.uk

Version 2.0. Updated March 2020. Next planned review 2022. This information was correct at the time of publication.

Registered in England and Wales. Company Limited by Guarantee: 7111375. Charity Number: 1133542. Registered Scottish Charity Number: SC041236.