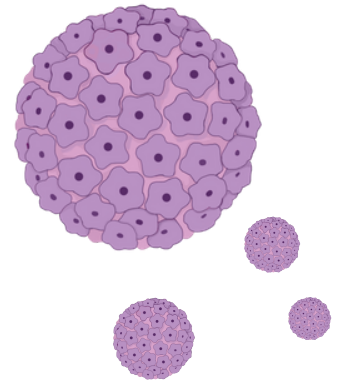


# Talking about HPV

## A guide for healthcare professionals

### Key facts about HPV

- About 8 in 10 people will have the human papillomavirus (HPV) in their life.
- Most types of HPV cause no harm and the virus goes away by itself, but a few types can cause cells to change, which may develop into cancer.
- The HPV vaccine, HPV testing in cervical screening (HPV primary screening), and a rise in HPV-related cancers mean more people are becoming aware of HPV.



“ *When I first saw on my letter that I had been diagnosed as being HPV positive, I didn't know what it was. When I Googled it, lots of places said it was a sexually transmitted infection, so I automatically thought my partner had been cheating. I knew nothing about it, and it felt dirty. No-one I spoke to had heard of it.* ”

### How do people feel about HPV?

#### Shamed

"Is it an STI? I feel so dirty."

"My partner thinks I've cheated."

#### Confused

"How did I get it?"

"Can I pass it on to my partner?"

#### Anxious

"Does this mean I have cancer?"

"Did I do something wrong?"

## Questions you may be asked

There is a lot of confusion and fear around HPV. Healthcare professionals can play a key role in reducing myths, stigma and helping people understand more about the virus. Some topics related to HPV can be difficult to explain in a simple way. These include dormancy, transmission and risk of reinfection.



*When I found out that I had cell changes and HPV, I freaked out. It takes a lot for me to cry, but I broke down. I was gripped with fear and uncertainty of what was going on inside my body. I had no idea what HPV was or how I had got it. I searched 'What is HPV?' and it said an STI. I was alarmed and confused, as I had been with my boyfriend for over four years. The diagnosis made me feel vulnerable and frightened. It was only when I started to learn a bit more that my fears began to disappear. I've been really shocked by how little is known about HPV and how much stigma there is, especially when it is so common.*



**It's important to be as prepared as possible for any questions. Here are some examples of questions you may be asked:**

- What is HPV?
- Why did I get HPV?
- What does this mean for me?
- What does this mean for my relationship/future relationships?
- Do I have to tell my partner?
- Has my partner been unfaithful?
- How can I get rid of it?
- What happens next?



*After my biopsy was taken, I got talking with the nurse about HPV. She told me for the first time that condoms don't necessarily protect you from the virus. She also mentioned that the amount of partners I or my partner had had made it more likely to come into contact with HPV. This is logically true, but it made me feel really dirty, like I'd contracted something horrible or that something was wrong with me. It doesn't matter how many people you've had sexual contact with, you can come into contact with HPV at any point.*



# How to talk about HPV

1

## Ask open-ended questions to check the person's understanding and feelings about HPV.

How someone feels about HPV can be influenced by a wide range of factors, so be mindful of different cultures, belief systems, personal experiences, and education.

You could say...

- ▶ "How does having HPV make you feel?"
- ▶ "Can you talk me through your understanding of what HPV is?"
- ▶ "What else would you like to know about HPV?"

2

## Be mindful of the language you use

Ensure the words that you use do not add to the stigma, shame and fear around HPV. It is unhelpful to link HPV to promiscuity and sexual behaviour, including calling it an STI or STD. Unlike many STIs, HPV can't be treated, fully prevented and is not always detectable.

You could say...

- ▶ "HPV is a really common virus that most of us get at some point in our lives."
- ▶ "It is really hard to protect against getting HPV."

3

## Acknowledge HPV is confusing

HPV is a new topic to lots of people and there are still gaps in research and understanding about the virus. Be prepared for difficult questions, especially ones where there is no right or wrong answer- for example, whether to tell sexual partners.

You may find that you do not have the answer to every question.

You could say...

- ▶ "I don't really know that, because there hasn't been enough research yet. But here's what I can tell you about HPV."

## 4

### Offer reassurance about HPV

Giving the facts about HPV can help people understand that, in most cases, the virus will go away on its own. You might want to talk about the role of the HPV vaccine and cervical screening.

This is a good chance to address the HPV myths and stigma, especially around shame, cheating and sexual behaviour.

You could say...

▶ "Sometimes people think having HPV is a reflection of their actions, but it's absolutely not. HPV is really common and hard to completely protect against."

## 5

### Avoid lots of numbers and statistics

Some patients may want statistics and find them reassuring. However, it is important not to overwhelm them with numbers. Here are a few key statistics:

- ▶ 9 in 10 people will get rid of HPV without it causing any problems.
- ▶ 8 in 10 people will have HPV in their lifetime.

## 6

### Signpost to further support

Jo's Cervical Cancer Trust offers reliable information and support at [jostrust.org.uk](http://jostrust.org.uk) and have a free Helpline on **0808 802 8000**.

The NHS and World Health Organisation also provide trustworthy information, as well as other charities and organisations that are experts in specific HPV-related cancers.

For more information about HPV or cervical cancer, visit [jostrust.org.uk](http://jostrust.org.uk) or call our free Helpline on **0808 802 8000**

Registered Charity Number: 1133542 / SC041236

