Jo's cervical cancer trust

HPV FAQs

This information is for primary care staff, including sample takers and reception staff. Other healthcare professionals may also find it useful.

Your patients may have lots of questions about cervical screening. These are some of the most common ones we hear, along with some simple suggestions of ways to answer them.

Why does cervical screening test for HPV?

Almost all cervical cancers are linked to high-risk HPV. By looking to see if you have high-risk HPV, which can cause cells to change, we can offer treatment or closer monitoring at a far earlier stage to prevent the development of cervical cancer. Research shows it will save many diagnoses every year.

Can I reduce my risk of getting HPV?

You can't completely protect against HPV, but you can reduce your risk. Smoking reduces the immune system's ability to clear HPV so stopping smoking is the most important thing. Having safer sex with a condom or dental dam can reduce the chance of passing HPV on, but not completely. The HPV vaccine is offered free to everyone in school year S1.

If your patient missed having the HPV vaccine at school and is under 25, they may contact you about having it for free.

Can HPV stay in the body for a long time?

In most cases, your immune system gets rid of HPV within 2 years. But in some cases, HPV may stay in the body for years.

Sometimes HPV does not cause any harm and will not be detected with a test. We call this dormant or clinically insignificant HPV.

Occasionally, HPV that was dormant can become active again and may start to cause cervical cell changes. This is called clinically significant HPV and would be detected with a test.

We don't know why HPV becomes active again, but cervical screening (a smear test) can help detect the virus and any cell changes early.

Did I get HPV from my current partner?

Although most people clear HPV within 2 years, the virus can stay in your body for many years – even decades – without causing any problems. That means you may never know you had it.

In some people, HPV can show up on your cervical screening results or start to cause problems years later. The time from getting HPV to developing genital warts, cervical cell changes or cervical cancer also varies. This makes it hard to know when you got HPV or who you got it from. HPV is not a sign that your partner has been unfaithful.

I am sexually active but don't currently have penetrative sex. Am I still at risk of getting HPV?

HPV is passed is on through skin-to-skin contact. For genital HPV, this includes vaginal, anal and oral sex. Although it is rarer, HPV can also be passed on through touching in the genital area and sharing sex toys. So anybody who has ever been sexually active is at risk of getting HPV.

I am LGBT+. Am I still at risk of getting HPV?

Anyone who has ever had any sexual contact is at risk of getting HPV. It doesn't matter what kind of sex that is – penetrative, oral, touching or sharing sex toys – or who you have it with.

Is HPV the same virus which causes genital warts?

Yes, HPV is the same virus. But the HPV types that cause genital warts and the HPV types that cause cervical cancer are different. The HPV types that cause genital warts are low risk, while the types that cause cervical cancer are high risk.

HPV 6 and 11 are the 2 most common low-risk types. They cause around 9 in 10 cases of genital warts. The Gardasil HPV vaccine that the NHS uses protects against HPV 6 and 11. Remember, having genital warts does not mean that you are more likely to get cancer.

If my partner or I have HPV, will we keep passing it between each other?

We are still learning about how HPV reinfection works between couples. Current evidence suggests that natural immunity to HPV, and going on to develop an immune response that would protect against reinfection is poor, so there is a possibility that reinfection between couples could happen.

I haven't had sex for a long time, could I still have HPV?

It's possible. In most cases, your immune system will eventually get rid of an HPV infection within 2 years. But HPV can stay in our bodies – sometimes without us knowing about it, as it is not detected with a test. This is called dormant or clinically insignificant HPV. This HPV can become active again, for reasons we don't know yet, and start to cause cervical cell changes.

Is HPV an STI?

HPV is often called an STI. Genital HPV is usually passed through skin to skin contact of the genital area. However, unlike many STIs, it is impossible to fully prevent and it can be passed on during protected sex as well as unprotected sex. Again, unlike many STIs, HPV can't always be detected. It can live in the body, sometimes undetected for long periods of time, meaning it is usually impossible to know when or where the virus was picked up.

What happens if I have cell changes without HPV?

It is possible to have cervical cell changes without having high-risk HPV. However, it is unlikely that these cell changes would develop into cervical cancer. The National Screening Committee recommended the move to HPV primary screening because it is more accurate at showing who is at higher risk of cell changes that may develop into cervical cancer.

Why do I only get invited every 5 years?

High-risk HPV is the main cause of cervical cancer, which is why we now test for it during cervical screening. As it's a more sensitive test, women and people with a cervix in Scotland are now invited for cervical screening every 5 years, regardless of their age. This is because it usually takes between 10 to 15 years for high-risk HPV to develop into cervical cell changes or cervical cancer. Without high-risk HPV, it is very unlikely that anything will develop within 5 years.

You can reassure your patients that this 5 year interval is safe and has been recommended by the UK National Screening Committee.