

# HPV

## **What is HPV?**

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection. The majority of those infected are not aware of this. HPV belong to a group of virus that number over 100 types. Over 40 of these viruses are found in the mucous membranes of the vagina. Most of these are harmless and do not give any symptoms. Some lead to genital warts and cervical cell changes; some disappear spontaneously or can be treated. Some HPV types can cause cancer and are called high risk HPV.

## **How is it possible to be infected by HPV?**

The main source of HPV infection is through sexual contact. It is estimated that over 70 per cent of sexually active women will be infected by the HPV virus at one time or another during their lifetime. HPV is most often found in women as they are regularly examined through a Pap test. However, it is assumed that HPV is as common in men, but this is not documented as well. Infection between humans and animals is not possible, nor through blood transfusions. Infection is possible, however, through skin contact without intercourse and oral sex.

## **How infectious is HPV?**

HPV is very infectious. The risk is greatest for sexually active women, under the age of 25 and those who change partners often. HPV is common in both the skin and mucous membranes in the vagina without giving symptoms. It is calculated that 20 per cent of the population is continuously infected.

It isn't possible to say who has infected whom; both current and earlier partners can be the source of infection. It is impossible to say with certainty because the infection could have taken place a long time ago.

Most HPV infections are harmless and most sexually active people get HPV and do not experience any symptoms or findings. All women aged 25 to 69 years old should have a Pap test done every three years to rule out cell changes.

## **How can I get rid of HPV?**

Most HPV infections disappear on their own within six to twelve months. It is estimated that 10 per cent of those who are infected will develop a chronic infection; in other words the immune system is not able to eradicate HPV. This increases the risk of developing cell changes in the cervix. Therefore, it is important that women 25-69 years old have a Pap test done so that abnormal cells can be discovered and treated.

## **Is effective treatment available?**

There is no treatment for the HPV infection itself. If the HPV infection has resulted in genital warts or cell changes in the cervix, treatment is available. Genital warts can be treated with creams, freezing, laser or surgery. Low grade cell changes in the cervix usually disappear by themselves without treatment, but they must be kept under supervision with new Pap tests and HPV tests. High grade cell changes are further

investigated with a tissue sample, and if pre cancerous lesions are found they can be treated by removing the outermost tip of the cervix. Cancers are treated by removing the uterus (womb) and perhaps with radiation therapy and chemotherapy.

### **Can HPV be prevented?**

Yes, but there is a high risk of contracting HPV among those who are sexually active. It is estimated that 20 percent of the sexually active part of the population may at all times have the infection. Early sexual debut and many sexual partners increase the risk. Persons who never have had sexual relations do not have HPV. As HPV also is found on skin that is not covered by a condom, use of a condom does not give complete protection against HPV. The HPV vaccine given before sexual debut protects against some of the HPV types.

### **Can HPV lead to cancer?**

It is important to note that most of those who are infected by high risk HPV types will never get cancer or cell changes. Those cancer types and precancerous cell changes, caused by HPV, are most common in women. A chronic infection with the HPV types that can cause cancer may lead to cervical cancer during a period of 10-20 years, if the precancerous cell changes are not discovered and treated. Smoking, contraceptives, genital diseases (herpes and chlamydia), weakened immune system, genetic factors and multiple births may increase the risk of cancer through a chronic HPV infection. HPV can also lead to cancer of the anus, outer genital organs, vagina, penis and throat. Persons with a weakened immune system are more at risk.

Source: <https://www.kreftregisteret.no/en/screening/Cervical-Cancer-Screening-Programme/Frequently-asked-questions1/HPV/>