



Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Cancer of the Cervix

HPV is a very common family of viruses found in both males and females.

What is HPV?

- HPV is a common family of viruses, with over 100 “types”.
- Some HPV types can cause ordinary and genital warts, but rarely cause cancer.
- Other HPV types can cause cancer of the cervix, and some other rare cancers, e.g. penis, vulva, anus, or mouth etc.
- HPV is most often found in and around the genital organs (the penis, vagina, anus, etc.).
- HPV infection usually goes away by itself.

How does someone get HPV?

- HPV is very common – about 3 out of 4 people who have had sex have been exposed to HPV at some time.
- The virus can pass between two people, mostly through sexual activity but also by skin-to skin contact.
- HPV can be transmitted by sexual contact with women or men.
- Usually there are no symptoms and people do not know they have HPV. This makes it hard to know how and when you were exposed to the virus.
- Condoms offer some protection, but HPV may be present on skin that is not covered.

What is the link between HPV and cancer of the cervix?

- Some HPV types can cause cell changes in the cervix (infections) that may slowly lead to cancer if they are not found and treated.
- Infection with HPV that does not go away (“persistent”) is necessary for the development of cervical cancer.
- Most women who have been exposed to HPV do NOT develop cancer of the cervix.

How do I know if I have an HPV type that is linked to cancer of the cervix?

- If you are over 30 and your Pap test shows mild cell changes, your doctor may suggest an HPV test so that you both have more information.
- HPV testing is NOT recommended for moderate or severe cell changes, as your doctor will refer you to a specialist.
- An HPV test can tell if you have one or more HPV types that may cause cancer of the cervix.
- An HPV test is not usually done on women under the age of 30 because HPV infection is very common in younger women and usually goes away on its own.
- HPV testing is not presently covered by OHIP.

Some HPV types can cause cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer), if these HPV infections are not found and treated.



It is hard to avoid HPV if you are sexually active, but you can reduce your risk.

Be aware that your risk of HPV infection may increase if:

- you start sexual activity at an early age
- you begin a new sexual relationship
- you or your partner has had many intimate partners

Other factors can also increase your risk of developing cervical cancer.

These include:

- a weakened immune system (which can be caused by HIV, chemotherapy or organ transplant)
- smoking tobacco and exposure to second-hand smoke
- using birth control pills for more than five years
- more than five full term pregnancies
- other sexually transmitted infections such as Chlamydia or herpes simplex virus 2
- poor diet (especially one that is low in antioxidants)

Regular condom use and safer sex provide some protection from HPV.

- Condoms are also effective protection against other sexually transmitted infection.

Coping with HPV

- Finding out that you have HPV may be upsetting. It is important to remember that HPV is very common.
- Many people with HPV have had only one or two sexual partners ever, and have no other risk factors for HPV.
- Tell your partner that you have HPV. They may need more information from their health care provider or treatment for genital warts.
- Most importantly, remember to follow through on your treatment plan.

With regular Pap tests and HPV vaccine, you can help prevent cancer of the cervix.

HPV Vaccine

- Ask your doctor about receiving a vaccine that protects against two of many HPV types that cause most cervical cancer.
- You will need three shots over a six month period.
- Starting with the 2007 school year, HPV vaccine will be offered to Grade eight females as part of the voluntary school-based immunization program in Ontario schools.

- At this time, everyone else must pay between \$400 - \$500 for the vaccine, which is not covered by OHIP.
- The vaccine is still being tested to see if it will be effective for males.
- *This vaccine does not protect against all HPV types, so it is important to continue with regular Pap tests.*

Where can I go for more information?

- Additional information about HPV, HPV vaccine, cancer of the cervix and screening is available on the OCSP website at: http://www.cancercare.on.ca/index_cervicalScreening.htm
- Government of Ontario: www.hpvontario.ca or call the INFOLine at: 1 866 559 4598
- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada: <http://www.hpvinfo.ca/hpvinfo.html>