

about HPV

What is HPV?

HPV stands for Human Papilloma Virus.

HPV is now recognised as the cause of 99% of all cervical cancers. There are over 100 types of HPV:

- some infect the skin and can cause warts or verrucas
- some infect the genital area and can cause genital warts
- some infect the genital area and can cause cervical cancer

Genital HPV can be separated into two categories; high risk and low risk. Low risk HPV rarely develops into cervical cancer. High risk HPV includes subtypes that are more likely to develop into cervical cancer.

However, the vast majority of women who contract a HPV infection will not develop cervical cancer. Most women will contract a HPV infection at some point in their lives and will clear the infection without ever knowing they had it.

How do you get HPV?

HPV is spread primarily through sexual contact although there may be some exceptions. HPV can be found anywhere in the genital area and therefore transmission cannot be prevented through condom use.

Infection with HPV that can cause cervical cancer has no clear signs or symptoms and it is therefore possible that:

- **You may have had the infection for many years without knowing it**
- **A partner may have been infected many years ago without knowing it**

If I have HPV, does this mean I will get cervical cancer?

Absolutely not. Over 80% of women will contract HPV over their lifetimes and most of these women will clear the virus spontaneously without ever knowing they had it.

A small number of women infected with the virus will develop abnormal cervical cells which are normally identified on a cervical smear. In a small proportion of these women the virus can eventually lead to cervical cancer. However, this process is believed to take upwards of 10 years and will only occur if the virus is not cleared during this time.

If you have a HPV infection that has not cleared, it is particularly important for you to attend regular cervical smears to ensure that any abnormal cells that may develop can be identified and treated. Regular screening greatly reduces your risk of cervical cancer.

How can I get tested for HPV?

Marie Stopes International offers HPV screening privately as part of our health screening service.

We recommend that only women over the age of 30 are screened for HPV as women under the age of 30 have a very high chance of a positive result that will clear spontaneously.

HPV testing is not currently routinely available on the NHS.

To make an appointment please call our central booking service on: **0845 300 0461**.

What should I do if I have a HPV infection?

It is most likely that your immune system will clear the virus on its own.

If your body is unable to clear the virus on its own you do have an increased risk of developing abnormal cervical cells. You will be asked to return to the clinic for regular HPV tests and cervical smears in order to monitor any cell changes that may occur.

Can HPV infection be prevented?

Cervical cancer vaccinations have been developed which target common strains of HPV that can lead to cervical abnormalities. They are mainly being given to young men and women between the ages of 13-25 years.

Even if you have already been exposed to HPV, it is very unlikely you will have been infected with all the types that the vaccines protect against. You will therefore still be able to benefit from protection against the HPV strains you have not been exposed to. There is no need to have a HPV test before having a vaccine. However, since these vaccinations cannot protect against all cervical cancers (only around 70%), it is important that women continue to have cervical smears.

How are the vaccinations given?

Three doses of the vaccine by injection are required and it is important that all stages of treatment are completed.

- first dose – at the date of the first appointment
- second dose – two months after the first dose
- third dose – four months after the second dose.

How effective are the vaccinations?

Studies suggest that the vaccinations are:

- 100% effective in preventing cervical cancer caused by HPV types 16 and 18 (which account for around 70% of cervical cancers)

Can HPV be treated?

Although the cervical cancer vaccines can help prevent HPV there are no specific treatments for HPV infection.

The most action you can take is to attend regular screening and monitor the virus. It is very likely that your body will clear the infection spontaneously. If your HPV infection leads to the development of abnormal cells you will be referred to a specialist gynaecologist for a colposcopy. Treatment for cervical abnormalities is usually very successful.

Where can I get more information about HPV testing and cervical cancer vaccinations?

Call Marie Stopes International for more information or to make an appointment on 0845 300 0461.