

# The link between cervical cancer and HPV (human papillomavirus)



**National Cervical  
Screening Program**

A joint Australian, State and Territory Government Initiative

# The link between cervical cancer and HPV

## Key facts:

- HPV is a virus (the human papillomavirus).
- Almost all abnormal Pap smear results are caused by HPV.
- Anyone who has ever had sex can have HPV - it's so common that four out of five people will have had HPV at some time in their lives.
- In most cases, it clears up by itself in one to two years.
- In rare cases, if the virus persists and is left undetected, it can lead to cervical cancer. This usually takes about 10 years.
- A Pap smear every two years can detect any abnormal cell changes caused by HPV, which can then be monitored and/or treated to prevent cancer.

Has your doctor told you that your abnormal Pap smear result may be due to an infection with HPV?

Are you wondering what it is, how you got it and what can be done about it?

This information aims to answer those questions for you. It also explains the link between this very common virus and cancer of the cervix.

## **What is HPV?**

Viruses are microscopic organisms that can live in the cells of our bodies and may cause disease. Symptoms vary depending on the type of virus.

**There are over 100 types of HPV that affect different parts of the body. This information is about the types of HPV that affect the genital area, as these may show up on your Pap smear.**

Some types of HPV cause warts, but most HPV infection is invisible. You might only find out about it when you have a Pap smear.

**Anyone who has ever had sex can have been in contact with HPV. It is so common that four out of five people have HPV at some time in their lives.**

## **How do I know if I have HPV?**

Most people will have HPV at some time and never know it. The body's immune system usually clears the virus in around one to two years.

A Pap smear is a quick and simple test in which a number of cells are collected from your cervix and sent to a laboratory where they are tested for changes. No drugs or anaesthetics are required and a doctor or women's health nurse can easily do it. It only takes a few minutes. A Pap

smear every two years is your best protection against cervical cancer.

Cell changes found by having a Pap smear are nearly always caused by HPV, and usually return to normal when the body has cleared the virus. If the changes continue, they can be treated before they become more serious.

## **How did I get HPV?**

HPV is spread through genital skin contact during sex. The virus passes through tiny breaks in the skin. HPV is not spread through blood or other body fluid.

Condoms offer limited protection as they do not cover all of the genital skin. Warts on any other parts of the body rarely spread to the genital area.

## **What does it mean if I have HPV?**

HPV is so common that it can be considered a normal part of life after you start to have sex. Four out of five people will have HPV at some time in their lives. Most women only become aware of the fact that they have HPV when they have an abnormal Pap smear result or if genital warts appear.

After it enters the body, HPV behaves in one of two ways:

- it can stay dormant (inside the body's cells); or
- it can become active.

When they are active, some types of HPV can cause warts. Other types cause invisible infection in the genital area, including the cervix.

It can take many years for the virus to become active, and when it does it usually only lasts for a short time. In most cases, the infection is cleared by the body in around one to two years.

Once you have been exposed to a particular type of HPV, you are unlikely to catch it again.

## **How is HPV related to cancer of the cervix?**

**HPV infection is very common but in most people the virus clears up naturally in one to two years.**

In a small number of women, HPV stays in the cells of the cervix. If the infection is not cleared, there is an increased risk of cervical cancer. When cervical cancer develops, HPV is found in almost all cases.

**Although HPV can cause cell changes that may lead to cervical cancer, this will usually take a long time - often more than 10 years.**

A number of factors such as increasing age, smoking and lowered immunity, together with the long term cell changes caused by HPV, may increase the risk of cervical cancer.

It is important to have a Pap smear every two years so that cell changes can be identified and either watched until they clear up or be treated when necessary.

**It is important to remember that most women who have HPV clear the virus naturally and do NOT go on to develop cervical cancer.**

## **What should I tell my partner?**

As HPV is so common, there is a strong chance that anyone who has ever had sex has HPV, or has had it in the past.

**You can have HPV for a long time without knowing it. It is possible you were infected recently, or many months or years ago and the virus has stayed undetected or dormant.**

People who discover they have HPV may feel shocked, angry or upset.

Because the virus can be hidden in a person's cells for a long time, having a diagnosis of HPV does not necessarily mean that you or your partner has been unfaithful. As we do not know how long HPV can remain dormant, for most people it is impossible to determine when and from whom they got HPV.

If you have HPV, it is quite likely that your partner has it too. If you have genital warts your partner may have them or may develop them. It is also possible that neither of you will have any symptoms at all.

Remember, most people will clear the virus from their body in about one or two years without any harmful effects.

If you or your partner are concerned about HPV, talk to your

doctor or go to a sexual health centre for further advice.

**HPV and herpes are *not* related. If you have HPV, it does not mean you will have herpes.**

## **How is HPV treated?**

There is no treatment for HPV. It will, in most cases, be cleared up by your immune system like most viruses.

However, the effects of the virus, such as any warts that appear or changes to the cells of the cervix, can be treated. Your doctor can suggest the treatment most suitable for you.

If your Pap smear indicates that cells have been affected by HPV, you should have more frequent Pap smears until these cells return to normal. If the changes continue, further tests may be necessary.

## **Can I be tested for HPV?**

There is a test available that can identify certain types of HPV associated with cervical cancer. This test is not helpful for women under the age of 30, as HPV is very common in this age group and usually goes away without causing any problems. Also, because there is no cure for HPV, there is little reason to have the test.

The HPV test is most useful for women who have had treatment for cell changes to check that the virus has gone

away. If you have had treatment for a high grade abnormality, you will need to have a Pap smear and a HPV test annually. Once both the Pap smear and HPV test are reported as negative on two successive occasions, you can then return to the two-yearly screening program.

Talk to your doctor or contact a sexual health centre if you would like more information about HPV tests.

## **HPV vaccine**

A vaccine is available that can prevent infection with the types of HPV that cause most cases of cervical cancer. The vaccine is approved in Australia for females between the ages of 9 and 26 years. Free HPV vaccine is available under the National Immunisation Program.

**Regular Pap smears are still essential as the HPV vaccine does not protect against all the HPV types that can cause cervical cancer.**

More information on HPV and vaccination is available on the Immunise Australia Program website at [www.immunise.health.gov.au](http://www.immunise.health.gov.au)

## **Remember:**

**While HPV is very common, cervical cancer is not common. Most women with HPV will not develop cervical cancer.**

**It usually takes around 10 years for changes to cervical cells caused by HPV to progress to cancer. Regular Pap smears are your best protection against developing cervical cancer.**

**See your health practitioner if you ever develop any symptoms such as unusual bleeding, even if your last Pap smear was normal.**

## **Will more frequent Pap smears offer more protection against cervical cancer?**

If your latest Pap smear result was normal and you have no symptoms or concerns, then your next Pap smear is due in two years time. There is no need to have another Pap smear any earlier. If you have any symptoms such as bleeding, discharge or any other worries you should go back to your doctor and discuss them.

**Cervical cancer usually takes around 10 years to develop. A Pap smear once every two years is enough to identify changes before they become serious.**

For more information on HPV, Pap smears or cervical cancer, log on to [www.cancerscreening.gov.au](http://www.cancerscreening.gov.au) or call the National Cervical Screening Program in your state or territory on **13 15 56**.