

Pap tests and the human papillomavirus [HPV]





Has your doctor told you your abnormal Pap test result may be due to an infection with the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

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

This brochure will answer those questions for you. It also explains the link between this very common virus and cervical cancer (cancer of the cervix).

What is the human papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus, a very common sexually transmitted infection which usually causes no symptoms and goes away by itself, but can sometimes cause serious illnesses. There are over 100 different HPV types affecting various parts of the body.

Around 50 HPV types can affect the genital area, including the cervix. We call these types 'genital HPV' which are considered either low-risk or high-risk. Genital HPV is very common and can be considered a normal part of being sexually active. Four out of five women have genital HPV at some time in their lives.

Of the 50 HPV types which can affect the cervix, around 15 high-risk HPV types have the potential to cause cervical cancer.

How do I know if I have genital HPV?

Most people will have genital HPV at some point in their lives and never even know it. The immune system usually clears the virus from the body naturally over time.

Sometimes you can tell you have genital HPV because genital warts appear. Genital warts are caused by low-risk HPV types and cannot cause cervical cancer or any other kind of cancer. However, not all HPV types cause warts.

Most women only become aware that they have HPV if they have an abnormal Pap test result caused by the virus. Because HPV is very common, abnormal Pap tests are quite common too.

A Pap test checks for changes to the cells of the cervix. These cell changes are almost always caused by genital HPV and usually return to normal when the body has cleared the virus. Your doctor may suggest more regular Pap tests to monitor the cell changes. If the changes persist they can usually be treated quickly and successfully before they become serious.

How did I get genital HPV?

Both men and women can get HPV and pass the virus on to sexual partners.

Genital HPV is spread through genital-skin to genital-skin contact during sexual activity (not just intercourse). The virus passes through tiny breaks in the skin and is not spread via blood or bodily fluids.

You can be exposed to HPV the first time sexual activity occurs, from only one sexual partner. Condoms offer some but not total protection, as they do not cover all of the genital skin.

What happens if I have genital HPV?

After entering the body, HPV behaves in one of two ways: it will either remain inactive inside the body's cells or it will become active. When active, warts can develop or it can cause abnormal changes to cervical cells. It can take many years for the virus to become active.

Once active, most HPV infections are cleared from the body naturally in around a year.

How is HPV related to cervical cancer?

When cervical cancer occurs, HPV is found in almost all cases. However, most women with genital HPV will not develop cervical cancer.

However when high-risk HPV types take longer than usual to clear from the body, the virus can cause more serious changes to cervical cells. This increases the risk of cervical cancer.

It is unlikely that HPV causes cervical cancer by itself. Other factors that can increase the risk of cervical cancer include smoking, lower levels of immunity, the presence of other sexually transmitted infections such as Chlamydia or herpes, long-term use of the contraceptive Pill and early age of first child birth.



The biggest risk factor for cervical cancer is not having regular Pap tests. It is important for women to have regular Pap tests so abnormal cell changes can be identified then either monitored or treated well before they may become cancerous.

What should I tell my partner?

Someone can have HPV for a long time without ever knowing it. It may be the result of sexual activity from many years ago. Finding out you or your partner has HPV doesn't necessarily mean either of you has been unfaithful.

If you have HPV, your sexual partner is likely to have it too. While either of you may develop warts at some stage, it may be that neither of you have any symptoms.

If you're worried about passing HPV on to your partner, talk to your doctor or nurse, or go to a sexual health centre for further advice.

How is HPV treated?

There is no treatment for HPV. Only the abnormal cervical cells or warts that are caused by HPV can be treated. If you have warts, your doctor can suggest the treatment most suitable for you.

If a Pap test indicates abnormal cervical cells are present, more frequent Pap tests may be required. If this is the case, talk to your doctor or nurse about how often you will need to return for tests. If cervical cells don't return to normal within a set time, further tests and treatment may be required, depending on how serious the cell changes are.

Can I be tested for HPV?

A test is available that detects HPV types associated with cervical cancer, but is often not helpful in women under the age of 30. In this age group, HPV is very common but usually no cause for concern, because the immune system usually clears the virus from the body naturally.

However, HPV tests are useful for women who have had serious or 'high-grade' cervical cell changes which needed treatment, such as laser therapy. For these women, a HPV test is performed along with a Pap test to check that the abnormal cells and HPV infection are no longer there. Once both the Pap test and the HPV test are reported as negative on two occasions in a row, the woman can return to two-yearly Pap tests. Medicare will cover the cost of the HPV test in this instance only.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you would like more information about HPV testing.

A vaccine to prevent cervical cancer

A vaccine is now available which can help protect against cervical cancer. The vaccine helps prevent infection with the two types of HPV which cause 70% of cervical cancers. The vaccine is most effective when given to females before they are exposed to HPV – that is, before they commence sexual activity.



The vaccine can be used in females aged nine to 45 years and involves three injections over a six-month period. It is currently available free of charge to girls aged 12–13 through the National Immunisation Program. Outside of this time it costs around \$450 for the three doses.

For more information about the HPV vaccine visit cervicalcancervaccine.org.au

All women who have ever been sexually active should continue to have Pap tests every two years, even if they have had the vaccine. This is because the vaccine does not protect against all types of cancer-causing HPV, and may only provide limited protection for women who have already been exposed to HPV.

Remember – while HPV is very common, cervical cancer is not. Most women with genital HPV will not develop cervical cancer.

For more information on HPV, Pap tests
or cervical cancer visit **papscreen.org.au**
or call the Cancer Council Helpline on
13 11 20.

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