

HPV - Human papillomavirus

HPV and multiple partners

Worldwide, HPV is the most viral infection of the genital tract. It spreads easily because it is passed on through skin-to-skin contact and can't be completely protected against. While it's true that having more partners means someone is more likely to come into contact with HPV, someone may also get it during their first sexual experience. In fact, many people become infected shortly after becoming sexually active.

- HPV is extremely common – 8 in 10 (80%) of men and women will have it at some point in their lifetime.
- it is not connected to the number of partners you have had.
- many people will have had HPV without ever realising because it doesn't have symptoms and usually goes away thanks to the immune system.

HPV and safer sex

'Safer sex' usually means using condoms, dental dams, or other barrier protection methods during sex. While these practices can help protect against many sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and can also help reduce the risk of getting HPV, it isn't possible to completely protect against HPV. The virus can be on the skin in the genital area that isn't covered by a condom or dental dam, so it can be transmitted by any intimate contact, not just penetrative sex.

HPV and STIs

While it can be sexually transmitted, HPV is a virus passed on through skin-to-skin contact not just as an STI.

HPV and long-term relationships

When a patient in a long-term relationship is diagnosed with HPV, they may be very distressed. They may worry their partner's been unfaithful or feel concerned their partner may think they've been unfaithful. But sometimes HPV can lie dormant for many years and then become active again. It can then start causing changes in the cervical cells. We don't fully understand the reasons this sometimes happens. But it means it isn't usually possible to work out where HPV has come from.

HPV and reinfection

People can get HPV more than once. HPV isn't just a single virus – it is an umbrella term for over 200 types. Although we are still learning about HPV, some research shows it's possible to have the virus, clear it, and then be reinfected with the same type of HPV later in life.

HPV and genital warts

Genital warts are caused by HPV types 6 and 11, which are considered low risk and are not linked to cervical cancer. The high-risk HPV types usually linked with cervical cancer are types 16 and 18. Having genital warts isn't connected with cervical cancer. But all women and people with a cervix may be exposed to high-risk HPV as well if they're sexually active.

HPV and men

In the past, guidelines stated that women who had never had sex with men didn't need to have cervical screening because it was thought only sex with men could transmit HPV. But we've learned more about the virus since then. We now know anyone who's sexually active can carry and pass on HPV. The types of HPV that affect the genitals can be spread easily through any intimate contact, not just penetrative sex.

HPV and women who have sex with women

Women who have sex with women are at risk of HPV because they are still having skin-to-skin genital contact. This means that cervical screening is still an important test for them, even if they've never had sex with a man.

HPV and cleanliness

Getting the virus is not connected with lack of hygiene and washing won't prevent it.

HPV and menopause

Women and people who experience menopause can still get HPV at any time in their lives. Someone diagnosed with HPV after menopause could have got the virus years ago, as it can lie dormant for a long time and become active later. Many patients in this age group could also be dating and starting new relationships, so may be newly getting HPV.

HPV primary screening

HPV primary screening is a way of testing the sample of cells taken at your cervical screening (smear test) appointment. It tests for HPV that can cause cervical cell changes to develop into cervical cancer.

What is HPV primary screening?

HPV primary screening is a way of testing the sample of cells taken during cervical screening. A lab tests your sample for a virus called high-risk HPV. High-risk HPV can cause cervical cell changes to develop into cervical cancer over time. If you have high-risk HPV, that same sample will be tested for cell changes.

The next steps are based on your result and tailored to your individual risk. You may:

- be invited back for cervical screening in 1 year
- be invited back for cervical screening in 3 years
- be invited back for cervical screening in 5 years
- be invited for further tests at colposcopy.

What are the benefits and risks of HPV primary screening?

- The National Screening Committee, which oversees all screening programmes in the UK, recommended the move to HPV primary screening because evidence shows it is a better test:
- HPV primary screening is the best way to find out who is at higher risk of developing cervical cell changes or cervical cancer. Almost all cervical cancers are linked to high-risk HPV. By knowing who has high-risk HPV, we can make sure that we monitor the virus and find any cell changes early before they potentially develop into cervical cancer.
- HPV primary screening is a more accurate test than cytology. This means it is better at detecting cell changes overall, as well as detecting them earlier.

What happens if I do not have HPV?

If you do not have high-risk HPV, your sample will not be looked at for cell changes. It is very unlikely you will develop cell changes or cervical cancer without having high-risk HPV.

You will be invited for cervical screening in 3 or 5 years, depending on your age and where in the UK you live.

What happens if I have HPV?

If high-risk HPV is found, your sample will be looked at for cell changes. If there are no cell changes, you will be invited back for cervical screening in 1 year. This is to make sure the HPV has cleared.

If high-risk HPV and cell changes are found, you will be invited for further tests at colposcopy. Not all cell changes develop into cervical cancer, but it is important that they are monitored and treated if needed.

No cell changes

If you do not have cell changes, your risk of developing cervical cancer is low. You will be invited back for cervical screening in 3 or 5 years, depending on your age.

Borderline or low-grade cell changes

If you have borderline or low-grade cell changes, the same sample is tested for high-risk HPV. This is called HPV triage.

If you also have high-risk HPV, you will be invited for more tests at colposcopy.

High-grade cell changes

If you have high-grade cell changes, you will be invited for more tests at colposcopy.

Myths among patients

Is screening a test for cervical cancer?

No. Cervical screening is a test to prevent cancer. It looks for conditions that may lead to cervical cancer, which can be detected years before cancer develops.

Does cervical screening check for other types of cancer?

No. 1 in 5 people mistakenly believe cervical screening can detect ovarian cancer. Having cervical screening doesn't protect against other cancers or conditions.

Does cervical screening really reduce cervical cancer risk?

Cervical screening is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of cervical cancer. There is no guaranteed way to prevent HPV. Condoms or dental dam use doesn't give complete protection and, while the HPV vaccine greatly lowers risk, it doesn't protect against all types of high-risk HPV.

Is cervical screening painful?

Many women and people with a cervix don't find cervical screening painful. However, we know that some do find it painful, so it's important to acknowledge this and not dismiss it as a myth. If patients do find it painful, there are adjustments we can offer to help.

Is cervical screening only for people who have had sex?

All women and people with a cervix aged 25 to 64 are entitled to cervical screening on the NHS, as soon as they receive their first invitation (which may be about 6 months before their 25th birthday). If someone in this group wants to attend cervical screening, they have the right to it. While sexual history may influence someone's risk, it shouldn't determine whether or not they can have cervical screening.

Do I need to have had breast cancer to develop cervical cancer?

No, these cancers are not linked. Cervical cancer is a separate thing to other cancers and can develop on its own, even if someone has never had cancer before.