



Factsheet: Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

What is Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)?

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is the name of a group of viruses that infect the skin on the body. There are more than 100 different strains/types of HPV. Some of them cause warts on the hands, feet and other parts of the body; others affect the genital area.

There are about 40 strains/types of HPV that can be transmitted sexually. Low-risk strains of HPV can cause warts on the genitals, and high-risk strains of HPV are linked to abnormal cell changes and/or cancer in the genital area e.g. cervical, anal, vaginal, and penile cancer. HPV is also linked to cancer of the tonsils, back of throat or base of the tongue (from oral sex).

HPV is a very common STI and most people clear the virus naturally.

How is it transmitted?

Genital HPV can be transmitted unknowingly from one person to another through:

- Intimate/close genital and skin to skin contact (The exchange of body fluids is not necessary).
- Unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex.

What are the symptoms?

A person can have HPV and not have any symptoms. Most people will have no symptoms and will not know they are infected.

- Some people develop warts on the genital area.
- High-risk strains of HPV can cause cancer if not detected early.

The HPV Test

- This test is not included as part of a regular STI check-up.
- Some private clinics offer blood tests to check for high-risk strains of HPV.
- All women over 25 are advised to go for regular cervical smears to check for abnormal cell changes.

How is it treated?

There is no treatment for the virus itself. However, there are treatments available for the infections and/or other illnesses that HPV can cause, e.g. genital warts or abnormal cell changes.



Prevention

- All women over 25 should go for regular cervical smears to check for abnormal cell changes in the cervix that can cause cervical cancer. The National Cervical Screening Programme in Ireland (www.cervicalcheck.ie) provides free smear tests to women aged 25 to 60.
- A vaccine has been developed to protect against the HPV strains most commonly associated with cervical cancer.
- Although condoms do not provide complete protection against HPV, they are effective at preventing other STIs. When sexually active, always use condoms and/or dental dams for vaginal, anal and oral sex.
- When using fingers or hands for penetration (anally and/or vaginally), use latex gloves or finger cots, particularly if there are visible cuts or broken skin on the hands, and do not share fingers (i.e. do not use fingers on yourself that you have already used on your partner where infected fluids could be passed on).
- Make informed decisions: talk to sexual partner(s) about STI testing and using condoms, and get informed about the risks.
- Mutual monogamy (both partners test for STIs and don't have any, and both partners agree to only have sex with each other, and keep it that way!).

The HPV Vaccine

Two HPV Vaccines have been developed and licensed to protect against the strains of HPV most commonly associated with cervical cancer:

- Cervarix®: protects against infection with two HPV types (16 and 18).
- Gardasil®: protects against infection with four HPV types (6, 11, 16 and 18).

In Ireland the HPV Vaccine Programme is offered free of charge to all girls in the first year of second level schools (before likely exposure to HPV). The vaccine can be obtained privately for girls outside this age group. Although studies have shown that the vaccines are effective in preventing infection in men, it is not currently recommended in Ireland.

Cervical screening in adulthood is still essential.

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www.hivireland.ie