



Cervical Screening Wales
Sgrinio Serfigol Cymru

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) Facts

What is HPV?

HPV stands for Human Papilloma Virus, a very common virus that most women will come into contact with at some time during their lives. There are lots of different types of the virus most of which do not cause any problems. The different types are known by a number.

What do the viruses do?

In most women – nothing, as the body will get rid of the virus on its own. However some types can cause problems on the skin. These are called either high risk or low risk types depending on what problems they are likely to cause. In some women, high risk types cause changes in the skin covering the neck of the womb (cervix). These changes are known as cervical

abnormalities and can include abnormal cells known as cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN) which can lead to cervical cancer in some women.

The low risk types can cause warts. It is important to realise that low and high risk types are different. Having warts does not lead to you developing cervical cancer.

Types 16 and 18 are the commonest high-risk types, whilst type 6 and 11 are the commonest low risk types, but there are many more types.

How do I get it?

HPV is spread by skin to skin contact. In the cervix this is usually by sexual contact.

Is it common?

Yes. Most women are probably infected at some stage in their lives but never know, as the body's own defence mechanisms (immune system) get rid of the virus.

How do I know if I have the virus?

The virus itself does not cause any symptoms even if there are abnormal cell changes on the cervix (CIN). If the virus has caused CIN (sometimes called “pre-cancerous changes”) this can usually be picked up by a cervical smear test so that it can be treated before it becomes cancer. However it is important to remember that not every abnormality picked up by the smear test will be due to CIN. Some may be due to inflammation due to the virus being present at the time the smear is taken, before the body has had a chance to get rid of the virus.

It's an infection – so when did it happen?

Although commonly called an infection, the HPV virus can lie dormant (sleeping) for many years and only become active a long time after you first came into contact with the virus. In fact in some people it may never become active as they develop a sort of immunity to the virus. It is impossible to say when

and where you came into contact with the virus.

Are there any tests for HPV?

HPV is not routinely tested for at present as it is difficult to detect in the laboratory. Sometimes changes that look like an HPV infection can be seen on a cervical smear or a cervical biopsy (if you have been to a colposcopy clinic). There are a number of research studies going on at present to see if HPV testing could be used in the cervical screening programme, and what is the best test.

Can it be treated?

Because HPV is a virus it cannot be treated with antibiotics. Fortunately in most women the body will get rid of the HPV on its own. If however you have an abnormal smear this may need to be investigated at a colposcopy clinic to see if you have abnormal cells (CIN). If so the majority of cases of CIN can be successfully treated in an outpatient clinic.

Can men get it?

It appears that although men can pass on the infection, it is very rare for it to cause them any problems.

How can I prevent it?

Using condoms may reduce your risk, but does not give you complete protection, although condoms do protect against other infections. Having regular smears increases the chance of CIN being found when it is easy to treat and before it becomes cancerous.

Does it cause Infertility?

No

Does it cause AIDS?

No

What about smoking?

It is known that smoking can make your body's immune system weaker, making it much more difficult for your body to get rid of the virus. This means you are at more risk of getting CIN or cervical cancer.

What about the future?

At present there are many unanswered questions regarding HPV. It is not known what tests are the best for finding HPV or whether HPV testing would be helpful in the Cervical Screening Programme. Vaccination is an area of interest with a number of different vaccines being currently tested. A special committee known as the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation decides whether vaccines are safe and effective for use across the UK, but as yet, no decision has been made. However there are several trials still taking place.

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