

# Human Papillomavirus

## What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?

HPV is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). Both males and females can be infected with HPV and about 75 per cent of people who have had sex have been exposed to HPV at some time in their life. The risk of being infected with HPV increases with having sex at an early age, having many sex partners, or having sex with someone who has had many partners. There are over 100 strains of HPV of which 30 to 40 strains can infect the ano-genital tract. Some strains of HPV can cause genital warts. These are usually painless but might be itchy, uncomfortable and hard to get rid of. Some strains of HPV cause genital, anal, throat and cervical cancers.

### Symptoms

Many people with HPV do not experience symptoms and may unknowingly spread the virus to other people. Sometimes HPV infection causes warts to develop in and around the genital area, including the groin and thigh. The warts can vary in colour and shape but are usually flesh-coloured. They can be flat or raised and may be found alone or in clusters. Women infected with certain strains of HPV may develop changes in the cells of their cervix that can lead to cancer. These changes can be detected through regular Pap testing.

### How it spreads

HPV spreads through sexual activity through intimate skin-to-skin contact in the genital area with an infected person. The virus can be found in and around the genital area including: the vagina and vaginal wall, the vulva, cervix, penis and rectum.

### Treatment

There is no cure for HPV, but the body's immune system will often fight off HPV infection. Treatment is available for both genital warts using chemical preparations, liquid nitrogen, lasers or surgery. Pre-cancerous cells on the cervix can be treated with laser, freezing or surgery.

## Protection

- Abstain from having sex or genital contact with others or, if you are sexually active, limit the number of partners you have.
- Use condoms or dental dams from the beginning to end of any oral, vaginal or anal sexual contact. Condoms will offer some protection from HPV, but since they do not cover all of the genital skin, they do not offer complete protection.
- Females between the ages of nine and 45, and males between the ages of nine and 26 can get vaccinated against HPV with Gardasil® or Gardasil® 9.
- Regular Pap tests are still needed to screen for cervical cancer, even if you have received one of the vaccines. If you are sexually active or have ever been sexually active, Pap test screening should begin at 21 years of age. Women who are not sexually active by 21 years of age should delay Pap test screening until sexually active. Sexual activity includes oral sex and digital penetration.

### *What is the HPV vaccine?*

- Gardasil® protects against four strains of the HPV virus: strains 6 and 11 (can cause genital warts) and types 16 and 18 (can cause cancer).
- Gardasil® is a vaccine that helps protect against four types of HPV that cause: 70 per cent of cervical cancers, 80 to 90 per cent of HPV-related anal cancers, and 90 per cent of genital warts.
- Gardasil® 9 protects against nine strains of the virus: strains 6, 11 (can cause genital warts) and types 16, 18, 31, 33, 45, 52, 58 (can cause cancer)
- Gardasil® 9 is a vaccine that protects against the nine strains of HPV that cause: 90 per cent of cervical cancers, 90 per cent of HPV related anal cancers, 90 per cent of vulvar cancers, 85 per cent of vaginal cancers, and 90 per cent of genital warts.

- Gardasil® or Gardasil® 9 are most effective if they are received prior to becoming sexually active and provide some protection if sexual activity has already taken place.
- The vaccine's protection lasts for at least five years. A booster shot may be needed later in life.
- The vaccine is given as a needle in the upper arm. Three injections are needed over a period of six months to be fully protected.

### *What are the side effects of the HPV vaccine?*

The HPV vaccine is safe and well-tolerated. If side effects occur, they are usually mild and include pain, swelling, itchiness and redness where the shot was given.

- Some people may develop a headache, fever, nausea and swelling of the throat and nose passages.
- Rare side effects are: throat spasms, inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract, swollen glands, high blood pressure, and reduced arm movement where the shot was given.
- Allergic reactions are rare but may include difficulty breathing, hives and rash.

See a health care provider immediately if a serious reaction occurs following vaccination.

### *Who should not get HPV vaccine?*

The vaccine should not be given to anyone who:

- Has already been fully vaccinated.
- Has had a bad reaction to a previous dose of HPV vaccine or any other vaccine.
- Is fighting an infection unless it is a simple cold.
- Has an allergy to any of the ingredients (yeast, aluminium) contained in the vaccine.
- Has a complicated health condition (e.g. bleeding disorder).