

HPV & Throat Cancer

Information
for patients,
their families
and loved ones

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HPV and throat cancer

Finding out that you have throat cancer can be shocking, confusing and frightening.

If your cancer was caused by HPV you might feel even worse as HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that most people do not know very much about.

This guide provides some useful information for patients and their families and tells you how to find out more if you want to.

It is produced by the Throat Cancer Foundation, which is a national charity, and has been checked by doctors who are throat cancer experts.

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Support is available to help you after diagnosis

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. A virus is a tiny germ which can pass from person to person and cause a wide range of diseases. The common cold, flu and chickenpox are examples of other diseases caused by viruses.

There are about 200 different types of HPV. Many types are harmless and some cause minor problems like verrucas on the feet. Other types cause genital warts.

About a dozen HPV types can sometimes cause cancer. They do this by damaging the skin and moist areas of the body, such as the throat. The types of HPV that cause most cancers are types 16 and 18.

HPV and HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) can be confused but in fact are completely different viruses.

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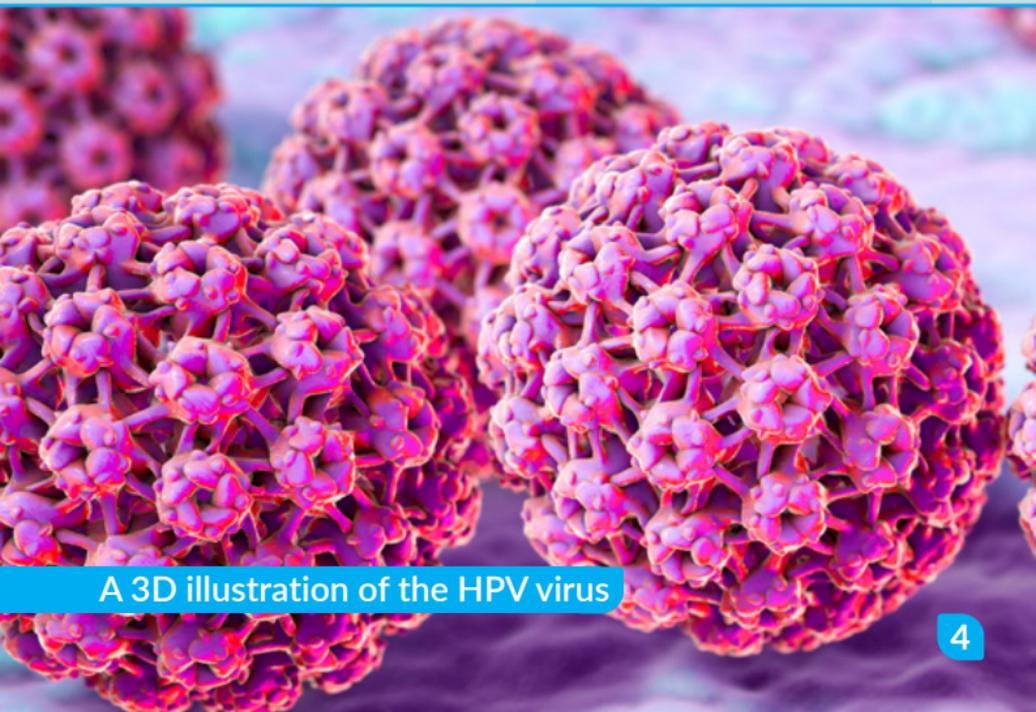
How common is HPV?

HPV is extremely common and most people will be infected with one or more types, which can include the types that cause cancer, at some point in their lives.

You will not know you have caught HPV. When you are infected, there are no symptoms like a fever.

Most people also clear the infection from their bodies within a year and before it can cause any problems. Only a very small proportion of people go on to develop cancer.

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A 3D illustration of the HPV virus

How do you catch HPV?

HPV is passed between people by skin-to-skin contact, including common sexual activities such as intercourse and oral sex.

It is possible that open-mouthed kissing can also pass on HPV and some people who are virgins have been affected. HPV can affect people of any gender and sexual orientation.

Having a cancer caused by HPV does not mean that you have had lots of partners, just that you happen to have been exposed to one of the types of the virus that cause cancer.

Nor does it mean that you have had unsafe sex. Using a condom makes it less likely that someone will catch or pass on HPV, but it does not completely remove the risk.

Oral sex is the most likely cause of throat cancers that have been caused by HPV. However, not every case of throat cancer is caused by oral sex.

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When did I catch HPV?

It is impossible to say. There is no test that can tell you when you were infected by HPV. However, it is likely that you caught HPV many years before your cancer diagnosis, perhaps as many as 30 years before.

It is also impossible to know who you caught HPV from.

What cancers does HPV cause?

HPV causes about 5% of all cancers worldwide – that's one in every 20.

More people are now aware that HPV causes cervical cancer, but it also causes cancers of the vagina, vulva, anus, penis and throat.

Throat cancers caused by HPV include cancers of the oropharynx (which includes the back of the tongue and the tonsils) and the larynx.

The number of throat cancer cases caused by HPV has increased sharply over the past 20 years and this trend looks set to continue into the future.

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Why have I developed throat cancer?

Doctors are not yet sure why some people with HPV develop throat cancer. However, people who have caught HPV and who also smoke or drink alcohol heavily may be more at risk.

Having more sexual partners also increases the risk because someone may be infected by HPV more than once by different partners at different times.

People with reduced levels of immunity may be more at risk of cancer caused by HPV, such as people with HIV or an autoimmune disorder.

Both men and women are at risk of throat cancer but men are more likely to be affected. This may be because men have been more likely to smoke and drink alcohol above safe levels.

It might also be because men naturally have slightly weaker immune systems. Some doctors think men may be more at risk from 'giving' oral sex to a woman because the vulva is more infectious than the penis.

Since HPV is almost impossible to avoid, nobody should feel responsible, blamed or guilty for catching it or for developing cancer.

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Can I develop another cancer caused by HPV?

This is not an issue that has been researched but doctors think the risk is low.

It is still important to be aware of the symptoms of cancers caused by HPV and to see a doctor if any appear. Women should take up the offer of cervical cancer screening.

What does having HPV mean about my cancer?

The good news is that throat cancer caused by HPV is generally easier to treat and the outcomes are much better, with much better survival rates and less chance of the cancer coming back.

Patients with these throat cancers generally respond better to radiotherapy and chemotherapy, although these treatments can still be debilitating and surgery is often disfiguring.

Your doctor is the best person to advise you on how well you will respond to treatment for your throat cancer.

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Are other family members at risk?

No. HPV is not spread through sharing a toilet, plates, cups, cutlery or kissing on the cheek or lips.

Mothers can, very rarely, pass on HPV to babies either in the womb or when they are born. Doctors do not know whether this can cause cancers in children when they become adults, but it is very unlikely.

Children can be protected against HPV infection by vaccination. In the UK, girls are offered free vaccinations by the NHS at the age of 12 or 13. Vaccination normally happens at school.

Boys are not currently offered free vaccination in the UK but they can be vaccinated privately, although this is expensive.

The Throat Cancer Foundation believes that both boys and girls should be offered vaccination by the NHS as this would prevent many cases of throat and other cancers in the future.

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Is my partner at risk?

Your partner is not at any greater risk of catching HPV or developing cancer than anyone else and doctors do not think you need to change your sexual behaviour with them following a diagnosis.

Your partner could consider HPV vaccination which would prevent any new infection, reinfection or a reactivation of an existing infection.

Vaccination might help to bring peace of mind but vaccination for adults is not available on the NHS and is expensive. Also, vaccination does not deal with an existing active infection.

Your partner might find it helpful to discuss whether to get vaccinated with their own doctor.

Testing for HPV is not thought to be useful as a way of preventing throat cancer. This is because there is no treatment which clears HPV from the body and most HPV infections do not cause any problems.

Your partner should be aware of the symptoms of the cancers caused by HPV and get advice if they appear.

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Your partner can ask their dentist to check for any signs of throat cancer during a routine check-up, and women should take up invitations for cervical cancer screening.

Successful treatment for throat cancer usually eliminates all risk of passing on the virus unless you are re-infected after treatment.

You should discuss with your doctor whether you should be vaccinated against HPV either before or after your treatment.

I feel embarrassed and ashamed about my HPV infection

This is a normal and common response to finding out that you have caught a sexually transmitted infection.

Some media reports and some websites contain inaccurate or sensational information about HPV and throat cancer that can reinforce the stigma about this disease.

It is important to remember that HPV infection is very common and affects most people at some point in their lives. It is as hard to avoid as colds and the flu.

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HPV can be caught from just one sexual partner and possibly even from open-mouthed kissing. It takes many years before an infection causes cancer.

The fact that your cancer was caused by HPV does not automatically mean that you or your partner have had large numbers of sexual partners (behaviour that is sometimes called 'promiscuity').

It also does not mean that you or your partner have had sexual experiences that some people might find unacceptable.

Surveys of sexual behaviour in the UK have found that most people have oral sex either occasionally or regularly and consider it to be entirely normal.

An HPV infection definitely does not mean that you or your partner have been unfaithful.

If you are distressed by your diagnosis, or if this is affecting your relationship with a partner, you could consider counselling.

This could be for you alone or for you and your partner. You can ask for a referral from your cancer care team.

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Where can I get more information?

Your cancer care team will be able to answer many of your questions about HPV and throat cancer.

There is also much more information available on the Throat Cancer Foundation website, and you can ask an expert a question through the site.

www.throatcancerfoundation.org

Macmillan Cancer Support hosts an online community group for people affected by head and neck cancers, including throat cancer. This is a place for people to support one another, ask questions and share experiences.

www.macmillan.org.uk

Cancer Research UK's website provides more detailed information about how HPV can cause cancer.

www.cancerresearchuk.org

NHS Choices has information specifically about oral sex and cancer.

www.nhs.uk

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Medical disclaimer

This guide provides information only and is not intended to be a substitute for advice provided by a doctor or other qualified healthcare professional.

Neither the Throat Cancer Foundation nor any person involved in this publication can be held responsible for any action you or a partner, family member or friend do or do not take after reading it.

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