

## Factsheet: Human papillomavirus (HPV)

### What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that is spread by skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. Anyone who has ever been sexually active can get HPV. HPV usually has no symptoms and is very common. Up to 80% of people will have HPV at some time in their life. There are many types of HPV and the body's immune system usually clears the virus within one to two years.

**Sexual activity** is any sexual contact with a partner involving:

- sexual touching of genitals (penis or vagina) and/or anus using hands, body or mouth
- oral sex (mouth, genital or anal contact)
- anal sex (with a penis or sharing sex toys)
- vaginal sex (with a penis or sharing sex toys)

### How is HPV related to Cervical Cancer?

Cervical cancer is a very rare outcome of an HPV infection that doesn't clear up by itself. Some types of HPV can cause cell changes in the cervix, which if left untreated, may develop into cervical cancer. It usually takes 10-15 years for an HPV infection to develop into cervical cancer.

Even though HPV is very common, most women who have HPV will not develop cervical cancer.

### How will I know if I have HPV?

HPV usually has no symptoms so the Cervical Screening Test is the best way to find out if you have the virus. The Cervical Screening Test detects cancer-causing HPV in the cervix. It replaced the Pap test as a more accurate way to check for early cell changes in the cervix that could develop into cancer.

If you are aged between 25-74 years you should have regular Cervical Screening Tests every 5 years.

Regular Cervical Screening Tests for women, and people with a cervix, are important for helping protect against cervical cancer. Over 80% of cervical cancer occurs in those who have never been screened or are not up-to-date with their cervical screening.

### Does the HPV vaccine completely protect me from HPV?

The [HPV vaccine](#) (Gardasil) will reduce your risk of developing cervical cancer. It protects you against the most common types of HPV that cause the majority of cervical cancers but does not protect against all of them. Even if you are vaccinated, you still need to have a Cervical Screening Test every 5 years.

The vaccine is available for free for young boys and girls through the National HPV Vaccination Program. The vaccine works best if you get it before becoming sexually active. Some adults can get the vaccine, however there is an out-of-pocket cost for people over 19 years. Talk to your doctor or nurse about whether the HPV vaccine is suitable for you.

## Can HPV infection be treated?

There is no treatment for HPV. The virus usually clears up by itself over time.

If HPV is found by a Cervical Screening Test, it can be monitored to see if the body naturally clears the infection. If the HPV has already caused cell changes, these changes can be treated. Your doctor or nurse will advise you about the testing and treatment process.

## I've always had safe sex, am I at risk of HPV?

Condoms and other barriers provide good protection from many sexually transmitted infections (STIs) however, they don't provide 100% protection against HPV as they don't cover all of the genital skin. Even if you always use condoms or other barrier methods, you will still need to have a Cervical Screening Test every 5 years.

## For more information

- [National Cervical Screening Program](#)
- [National HPV Vaccination Program](#)
- Contact the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to [www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline)
- National Relay Service (for people who are deaf, and hearing or speech impaired) 133 677
- TIS National's immediate interpreting service - 131 450

Or visit your nearest Family Planning NSW clinic or local General Practice (GP)