

# The human papillomavirus (HPV)



HPV is a common virus that has no signs or symptoms and has been linked to certain cancers and health conditions. There are, on average, more than 100 different types of HPV and of these, 40 affect the genital area.

While HPV can clear on its own, if it doesn't, it can lead to certain cancers and lesions. There is no way to predict if HPV will clear on its own.

## How it is transmitted

HPV is mainly spread through skin-to-skin contact and genital contact. It is not only transmitted sexually as the virus has been found in girls who have never had sexual intercourse. There have also been a few cases where mother-to-newborn transmission during delivery has occurred.

## Who can get HPV

HPV can affect everyone. While the virus has strongly been linked to cervical cancer in women, men of any age can get it if they have been exposed to the virus.

## Link between HPV and disease

There are four types of HPV that cause the most concern. 70% of cervical cancer has been linked to types 16 and 18, while 90% of genital warts have been linked to types 6 and 11. HPV has been linked to cancer of the vagina, vulva, anus, penis, lungs, prostate, throat, mouth, upper airways, neck, tonsils, and base of the tongue. HPV can

cause precancerous lesions, genital warts, and growths in the respiratory tract and lungs.

## Screening of HPV

Unscreened women are at the greatest risk of developing this malignant disease. Going for regular gynaecological check-ups, including a Pap smear (once you have become sexually active or are 18 and older), can prevent most cancers of the cervix. Women over 30 and above are more prone to HPV and are recommended to have an HPV test. At this age HPV is less likely to disappear on its own.

Unfortunately there are currently no HPV tests for men.

## What is the HPV vaccine?

There are two HPV vaccines available from most clinics. Both protect against HPV and the vaccines are up to 90% effective against the two most common cancer-causing HPV strains (16 and 18) in women who have not yet contracted the virus. All females up till the age of 45 can benefit from being vaccinated, even those who already have HPV already as it reduces reoccurrence. HPV vaccines can also be taken by men with effectivity.