

Factors that affect the immune system include:

Smoking: There is now sufficient evidence to suggest a casual relationship between smoking and cervical cancer. It has been reported that smoking less than one packet of cigarettes per day can increase the risk of developing cervical cancer by as much as three times.

Other virus infections such as HIV and recent glandular fever may reduce your body's ability to fight HPV.

Prescription drugs: Immunosuppressive drugs such as chemotherapy, hormones and steroids can all lower immunity.

Lifestyle factors such as prolonged stress, eating disorders, depression, poor diet, chronic sleeping problems and excessive exercise can all lower immunity.

Pregnancy: Immunity can be lowered during pregnancy, however having the 'wart virus' does not affect your ability to become pregnant nor impact on delivery options. There is no link between HPV and miscarriage or other types of pregnancy complications.

Are there other risk factors?

The likelihood of coming into contact with HPV increases with the number of partners you have. Using a condom reduces the risk of sexually transmissible infections. However, condoms do not protect against infection with HPV from body parts that are not covered by a condom (such as the scrotum or vulva).

What can I do to care for myself?

- Have regular two-yearly Pap smears
- Maintain good general health: healthy diet, regular exercise, enough sleep and relaxation
- Avoid smoking

Where can I have a Pap smear?

Choose a person or place where you feel most comfortable.

Options available are:

- Your doctor
- FPWA
NORTHBRIDGE (08 9227 6177)
- ISHAR Multicultural Centre for Women's Health
MIRRABOOKA (08 9345 5335)
- Aboriginal Medical or Health Services
 - Derbarl Yerrigan
EAST PERTH (08 9421 3888)
 - Various regional centres
- Community or Women's Health Centres
 - Women's Health Care House
NORTHBRIDGE (08 9227 8122)
 - Gosnells Women's Health Service
GOSNELLS (08 9490 2258)
 - Women's Health Works
JOONDALUP (08 9300 1566)
 - Midland Women's Health Care
MIDLAND (08 9250 2221)
 - Rockingham Women's Health
ROCKINGHAM (08 9527 8221)
 - Fremantle Women's Health Centre
BEACONSFIELD (08 9430 4545)

Where can I get more information?

WA Cervical Cancer Prevention Program
13 15 56 (cost of a local call) or
1800 800 033 (toll free from the country)



Department of Health

— WA Cervical Cancer —
PREVENTION PROGRAM

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HPV and cervical cancer -what is the link?



What is HPV?

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), also referred to as 'wart virus', is a very common viral infection. Three out of every four women will be exposed to HPV at some time in their lives. Most women with HPV will NOT develop cervical cancer.

There are more than 100 different types of HPV, some of which cause genital warts and a few types have been linked to the development of cervical cancer. HPV infects the outer layers of the skin on the genitals - on the vulva, inside the vagina, on the cervix, around the anus, on the penis or inside the urethra. The vast majority of people carry HPV without even knowing it.

How can this virus affect me?

Even if you have HPV, the infected area can remain normal. In this case, your body controls the infection and you may never know you have been infected.

Some types of HPV cause genital warts. These are not related to cervical cancer, but they should alert your doctor to the presence of HPV infection in your cervix and may warrant further investigation.

Abnormal cell changes due to HPV may be detected by a Pap smear. These changes may be the first sign that you have the virus. A diagnosis of abnormal cells DOES NOT mean that you have cervical cancer, but DOES mean that you need to be monitored more closely. In some cases, you may require treatment and will be referred to a specialist Gynaecologist. Cervical cancer usually takes many years to develop, which is why regular two-yearly Pap smears are advised.

Many people carrying HPV in their skin have no symptoms or signs of the infection. If you see or feel unusual lumps on your genitals or you know you have had sex with someone who has warts, you should see a doctor. Any unusual or

persistent symptoms such as itching, discharge, pain during or after intercourse, or abnormal bleeding should be checked by your doctor.

Why is HPV important?

HPV is an important health concern for women as it has been identified as the primary cause of changes to the cells of the cervix which may lead to cervical cancer. There are various strains of the HPV virus, which can be divided into two groups:

- 1. Low-risk types** which can cause genital warts and minor changes to the cervix. The body usually clears the virus within one to two years, or it may lie dormant and become active again, potentially many years later. Changes caused by low-risk HPV types may reoccur, but are not linked to the development of cervical cancer.
- 2. High-risk types** which can cause pre-cancerous changes and cervical cancer. These types take longer than usual to clear from the body, thereby increasing the risk of developing abnormal changes that can lead to cervical cancer if left untreated. Having a high-risk HPV type does NOT mean you will develop cervical cancer, but will require more frequent check-ups.

Most women do not know they have HPV until it shows up on their Pap smear. Pap smears may indicate that you have the virus, but DNA typing for low or high-risk is done by a swab test. Your doctor can discuss testing with you.

Can I get rid of HPV?

There is currently no medication available to treat HPV on the cervix. However, if your cervix is treated surgically for pre-cancerous cell changes, then the HPV will often be removed at the same time.

In many women, the immune system is capable of reversing the changes and making signs of HPV infection disappear without treatment. For this reason, you may be recommended to have more

frequent checks following an abnormal Pap smear, rather than be referred for treatment. Remember to attend these important follow-up appointments.

How is the virus transmitted?

The virus is almost always sexually transmitted. There are however, some people who are exposed to the virus at birth and may show signs of the virus for the first time even before they are sexually active. The virus may be inactive for twenty years or more after infection, activating only when the immune system is 'low' (not working effectively).

The sudden appearance of warts in a person who is not sexually active or who is in a stable relationship does not mean that the person has been recently infected through sexual transmission. People who discover they have HPV often feel shocked, angry, upset and blame their partner. It is important to remember that HPV can remain inactive for many years before becoming active.

Why is the immune system important?

Certain factors can affect your ability to deal with infections generally and with HPV specifically. It is not only the presence of the virus that is important, but how your body reacts to the presence of the virus. This reaction depends on the strength of your immune system.

