

Human papilloma virus (HPV)

This leaflet aims to help women with an abnormal smear to gain an understanding of Human Papilloma Virus.

What is Human papilloma virus (HPV)?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a very common infection and is carried by 80% of women at some time in their lifetime. In most cases, it clears up by itself without the need for treatment. Most women show no signs or symptoms of carrying the virus. There are at least 200 different types of HPV, which many of which are harmless. However, some types, known as 'high-risk' can cause abnormalities in the cells of the cervix known as Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN). In this condition, cells of the cervix may begin to show precancerous changes and treatment may become necessary to prevent disease progression towards cancer.

How do women get HPV?

80% of most women, who have been sexually active, will have been exposed to HPV. HPV is easily contracted through sexual contact between men and women and with same sex partners. As the virus causes no symptoms in the majority of people, most do not realise they have it. You can be reassured that a positive test for high risk HPV types need not imply infidelity or promiscuity in either partners.

Can getting HPV be avoided?

If a woman is sexually active, there are no known methods (such as condoms), which are shown to prevent transmission of the virus. It is therefore important, if a woman is sexually active to participate in the cervical screening programme, to pick up early changes in the cervix.

When would women be tested for HPV?

The National Cervical Screening Programme now offers a HPV Primary Screening test on all cervical smear samples.

- If they are negative for HPV, the woman will only need a smear in 5 years' time. If the woman is positive for high risk HPV, the sample is then tested for abnormal cells. There is a 1 in 5 chance that she will have an abnormality significant enough to need treatment.
- To confirm cure (HPV Test Of cure) 6 months after treatment of CIN. This will then determine the frequency of the follow-up.

How can HPV be detected?

The test is done using the samples of cells of the cervix taken during a smear test so no additional samples are needed.

HPV alone on the cervix cannot be actively treated because it is a virus, not bacteria, and will therefore not respond to antibiotics. Whilst CIN is easily treated, at present there is no specific treatment for HPV itself.

Useful contacts

If you would like more information about HPV or cervical screening, you could speak to the practice nurse at your GP surgery or visit the NHS Cancer Screening Programme website.

If you have any questions, please contact the colposcopy office on:

0118 322 8964 option 3 (Monday-Friday 8am-4pm).

The Colposcopy Clinic is located on Sonning Ward, Level 5 Maternity Block, Craven Road, Reading RG1 5AW.

Useful websites

- www.cancerscreening.nhs.uk
- www.bsccp.org.uk

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Lead Colposcopy Nurse, March 2015

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