Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

This information sheet is about Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and how it relates to your type of cancer. If you have any questions after reading this information sheet then please ask your doctor or specialist nurse.

What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?
HPV is a very common virus with over 200 types, each of which is known by a number. The virus affects the skin and mucous membranes, commonly causing warts or papillomas (non-cancerous tumours). Some types of HPV can cause abnormal cell changes, which can increase the risk of developing a cancer. Examples of this can be seen in HPV 16 & 18, which may lead to cancer of the cervix (neck of the womb) and cancer of the oropharynx (middle part of the throat including the back of the tongue and tonsils).

How is HPV infection spread?
HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact and through normal sexual activity, including open mouth kissing. Because HPV is so common, it is likely that we will have all been exposed to the virus at some time during our lives. Research is considering whether using the same drinking cups and utensils can also spread the virus.

Can HPV infections be prevented?
If you are or ever have been sexually active, it may be difficult to avoid coming into contact with HPV. It can be impossible to tell if your partner is infected, as there are no symptoms. Condoms and other barrier methods of contraception only reduce some of the risks of genital infection, as skin-to-skin contact and open mouth kissing can also transmit the virus. It is possible to get an HPV infection even if you have only had one partner. Even complete abstinence from any sexual activity is not a guarantee of avoiding an HPV infection.

Vaccines (Gardasil or Cervarix) are highly effective at preventing HPV infections and are now offered to girls aged 12-13 (pre-puberty). It is hoped that this will reduce the incidence of cervical cancer by 70%. However, it will still be important for them continue to have regular cervical smear screening.

Currently, boys can only access the vaccine if they agree to pay for the vaccine themselves.

Early evidence shows that the vaccine is also effective at preventing oral HPV infections, which will reduce the incidence of HPV related cancers of the oropharynx. The vaccine is not effective for treating already established HPV related cancers.

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There is evidence to suggest that people who smoke and have HPV are more likely to develop cell changes that can lead to cancer than those who don’t smoke.

What is the association between HPV and cancer?
Most HPV infections occur without any symptoms and go away untreated within 1-2 years and do not cause cancer. Occasionally, these infections can persist, and over time, they mutate to cause a cancer. Researchers believe that it can take between 10-30 years from the time of exposure to HPV infection, before a cancer forms.

High risk HPVs are the cause of 5% of all cancers Worldwide. Developing a cancer of the oropharynx does not mean that you are abnormal, promiscuous or unfaithful. There should be no shame or blame associated with an HPV diagnosis.

Long-term partners are not at any increased risk of developing an HPV infection or an HPV related cancer, as they have likely already been exposed to HPV. Female partners should continue to have regular cervical screening.

Recent research has shown that patients with HPV-related oropharynx cancer have better treatment outcomes. Further research is on-going and is looking at whether less intense treatments can be just as effective.

Can HPV infections be detected and treated?
A woman may receive an HPV diagnosis when she is given her cervical smear test result. Recently, the test has been refined to screen for high-risk forms of HPV. It is hoped that this will help with early detection and prevention of cervical cancer.

Currently, there is no reliable, approved test for detecting oral HPV infections in the UK. There are no available treatment options for HPV infections. However, if warts and papillomas develop then they can be surgically removed or treated with heat or freezing therapy.

The Future...
There are still many unanswered questions and research is on going. Your healthcare professional may not be able to provide answers for all of your questions, but will be willing to discuss them with you. If you would like to read more about HPV the following approved websites and articles may be helpful.

This information sheet has been compiled using the following sources.

Websites

Articles


De-ESCALaTE HPV_HPV Info Sheet V1.0_21Oct2011