

Common questions about sexual intimacy following HPV related throat and neck cancer treatment

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections – most people will be exposed to it at some point in their lives. In most cases, the body clears the virus on its own, but in some it can lead to serious outcomes like cervical, anal, throat, and other genital cancers. The good news? HPV related cancers are largely preventable. The Gardasil vaccine given (ideally) around 11- or 12-years-old, before sexual activity begins, is a safe, effective way to provide long-term protection. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the HPV vaccine is free for everyone aged 9- to 26-years-old.

I have been in a long-term, monogamous relationship – how could this have happened?

Having an HPV-related cancer does not suggest that you or your partner have been unfaithful. Around 80–90% of sexually active people will come into contact with HPV at some point in their lives, usually without knowing. Most HPV infections go away on their own. In a small percentage, the virus may remain dormant and do nothing. In a much smaller group, often years later, it can cause abnormal cell changes that lead to cancer. This process takes time and often has nothing to do with recent exposure.

Is kissing my partner increasing my risk of HPV coming back/rearing up and becoming cancerous again?

No. Kissing your partner will not increase the risk of recurrence for you or put your partner at risk. HPV infections that lead to cancer typically lay dormant for many years before becoming active, and recurrence is not related to reinfection through kissing.

Can I still be sexually active after treatment?

Yes, absolutely. Most people can return to a healthy, satisfying sex life after treatment. However, treatment – especially radiation – can cause temporary side

effects like dry mouth, fatigue, or changes in swallowing or speech. Open communication with your partner and taking things slowly can help rebuild confidence and intimacy.

Would me performing oral sex on my partner increase my risk of HPV coming back/rearing up and becoming cancerous again?

No, you do not pass HPV back and forth repeatedly like a cold. If you are in a long-term, stable relationship, there is no need for protective barriers like dental dams. In new relationships, however, dental dams are recommended regardless of cancer history to reduce the risk of new HPV exposure or other STIs.

Will my libido or sexual response be affected after treatment?

It's possible, especially in the short-term. Fatigue, stress, body image changes, and the physical side effects of treatment can all influence desire. Be patient with yourself, and consider speaking to a counselor or someone who specialises in sex therapy if concerns persist (you can often self-refer to these professionals).

Would radiation treatment have killed the particular strain of HPV that caused my cancer or could it still be in my system?

Radiation therapy is highly effective at treating HPV-related tumours, which are typically more sensitive to this treatment.

Would my having HPV put my partner at more risk?

No. Your partner has most likely already been exposed to the same HPV strain, especially if you've been in a long-term relationship. For most people, the immune system clears HPV before it causes any problems. That's why regular cervical screening (for women) is important, and why vaccinating young people is a key step in preventing HPV-related cancers in the future.

Can males get tested for HPV?

Unfortunately, there is no routine or reliable HPV test for males like there is for females (via cervical screening). However, most HPV infections clear on their own, and the best prevention remains vaccination, healthy lifestyle choices, and regular checkups.

Is there anything apart from healthy eating, not smoking/moderate alcohol intake, and exercise that could help negate this happening again e.g. antibacterial mouthwashes?

There is no evidence that antibacterial mouthwashes make a difference in preventing recurrence. The best things you can do are exactly what is mentioned in the question: avoid smoking and reduce or eliminate your alcohol intake, maintain a balanced diet, and stay physically active.

Is there any benefit to having the HPV vaccine after I have been diagnosed? Will it protect me against other strains of HPV?

While the HPV vaccine won't treat an existing head or neck cancer, it may still offer benefits after diagnosis. It can protect against other high-risk HPV strains that you haven't been exposed to, potentially reducing the risk of future HPV-related cancers. This is especially relevant if your cancer was caused by one type of HPV and you're still at risk for others. Some emerging research even suggests it might lower recurrence risk, though more evidence is needed. If you haven't been vaccinated, it's worth discussing with your healthcare provider to see if it's appropriate for you.

Useful links for more information:

Head & Neck Cancer Support Aotearoa: <https://hnksa.org.nz/>

The New Zealand HPV Project: <https://www.hpv.org.nz/>

Head and Neck Cancer Foundation Aotearoa:

<https://www.headandneckcancer.org.nz/>

<https://www.mdanderson.org/publications/focused-on-health/what-men-need-to-know-about-hpv-related-throat-cancer.h12-1593780.html>

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39971254/#:~:text=Conclusions%3A%20Most%20sexual%20health%20outcomes,counseling%20of%20patients%20with%20HPVOPC>