

STIEF 

HPV and Throat Cancer

Common Questions and Answers

A brochure for patients with HPV-positive
throat cancer and their families



What is HPV?

- HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that can infect the oropharynx (tonsils and back of throat), genitals and anus.
- There are many types of HPV. HPV can cause cancer, warts, or have no effect.
- HPV is very common. Without vaccination, 80% of adults will acquire some type of genital or oral HPV infection at some point in their life.
- Some people, many years after acquiring oral HPV, may develop throat cancer as a result of the HPV infection. This is technically known as HPV-associated oropharyngeal squamous cell cancer (HPV-OSCC).

What causes throat cancer?

- Studies in New Zealand and the US show that HPV causes most throat cancers.
- It is recommended that throat tumours be tested for HPV.
- Smoking and alcohol can also cause throat cancer.

How did I get an oral HPV infection?

- HPV is transmitted to your mouth by oral sex. It may also be possible to get oral HPV other ways.
- Increased number of oral sex partners increases chances of oral HPV infection.
- Having an oral HPV infection does not mean your partner was/is unfaithful or had a large number of sexual partners.
- Many people with throat HPV cancer have only had a few oral sex partners.

Who has oral HPV infection?

- Genital HPV is so common anyone who gives oral sex may be exposed to oral HPV during their life.
- In the US, around 10% of men and 3.6% of women have HPV in their mouths at any given time.
- Most people clear the infection on their own within a year, but in some cases HPV infection persists.

Can I transmit oral HPV to others?

Family and friends

- Oral HPV is not casually transmitted by sharing drinks or kissing on cheeks.
- It isn't known yet if open-mouth kissing can transmit HPV.

Partners of people with throat cancer

- If one partner has HPV then the other partner is likely to have been exposed to the infection.
- You do not need to change your intimate sexual contact.
- Partners with a cervix should continue to have regular cervical (PAP) screening as usual.

New sexual partners in the future

- Many people with HPV throat cancer have no HPV detectable in their mouth after treatment, while others do.
- With new partners, discuss protection methods (e.g. condoms, dental dams or barrier protection).

When did I get this infection?

- It is impossible to know the time from first oral HPV infection to cancer, but it takes many years. Therefore, it is not possible to know when and from whom the infection was acquired.
- HPV is common and the great majority of people who acquire it will clear the infection and never have any evidence of having had an infection.

What does having HPV in my tumour mean?

- People with throat cancer, with HPV in their tumour, live longer on average than people without HPV in their tumour (i.e. HPV-positive tumours usually respond well to therapy).
- However, people who smoke tobacco or have smoked for a long time in the past do not live as long, on average, as people who have never smoked. Current smokers are strongly encouraged to stop. Help is available.

Will the HPV vaccine help me?

- The HPV vaccine offers best protection from HPV if given before becoming sexually active.
- For people who are already sexually active, the vaccine may still be of benefit as it will prevent the acquisition of new HPV infections for the strains the vaccine covers.
- The vaccine will not help clear an infection you already have.
- The HPV vaccine (Gardasil 9) is licensed for use in New Zealand for females aged 9–45 years and males aged 9–26 years. The vaccine is free for everyone aged 9–26 years (inclusive). Ask your GP or health provider for further information or to get the vaccine (see Preventing HPV Cancers by Vaccination: What Everyone Should Know on www.hpv.org.nz).

Will my partner also get throat cancer?

- The risk of HPV throat cancer may be slightly higher among partners of people with HPV throat cancer, but this cancer remains extremely rare among partners.
- Unlike for cervical cancer, there is no current effective screening test for HPV-related throat cancer.

Where can I get further information?

- New Zealand HPV Project website www.hpv.org.nz
- New Zealand HPV Project Helpline Toll free **0508 11 12 13**
- Your GP, Family Planning Clinic or Sexual Health Clinic

Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation

Copies of this pamphlet are available from:

STIEF, PO Box 2437, Shortland Street,
Auckland 1140, New Zealand

Email: info@stief.org.nz
www.stief.org.nz

The New Zealand HPV Project

www.hpv.org.nz

Helpline toll free: **0508 11 12 13**

Phone: **09 433 6526**



**View our consumer website with information about sexual health
and all sexually transmitted infections, including a national
database of sexual health providers:**

www.justthefacts.co.nz

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