STIEF

HPV

Cervical Screening

HPV
THE NEW ZEALAND HPV PROJECT

Cervical Screening and Human Papillomavirus (HPV) Infection

This pamphlet contains information about HPV and the process for cervical screening. If you have had a positive HPV test or want more information about cervical screening you should read this pamphlet.

What is HPV?

HPV is one of the most common viral infections. It is so common many experts believe HPV infection should be considered an inevitable outcome of normal sexual activity. More than 150 types of HPV have been identified. Approximately 40 HPV types can infect the vulva, vagina, cervix, penis, anus and throat. In most people the virus is harmless and causes no symptoms.

The majority of people who get infected with HPV won't know they have it – the infection is usually short-lived, and the virus typically leaves the body within 2 years. There is no treatment to get rid of HPV itself, though there is treatment available for some of the things that HPV infection can lead to.

In some people, HPV can cause genital warts. These are harmless, but may be distressing and can usually be treated successfully. In other people, HPV causes abnormal cells which can sometimes lead to precancer or cancer, including cervical, vaginal, vulval, anal, penile, and head and neck cancers.

HPV is a very common infection in the genital tract.

How and when did I get HPV?

80% of unvaccinated adults (i.e. those who haven't had the full course of the HPV vaccine) will pick up HPV at some point in their life. HPV infection results from skin-to-skin contact and can be transmitted by lots of different types of sexual contact (including genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital and oral-anal).

HPV can occur when there has been only one sexual partner and it can lie dormant for many years. There is no way to know which partner it came from or how long ago. Having HPV does not mean that a person or their partner is having sex outside the current relationship.

The interval between infection with HPV and cervical cell abnormalities can vary from months to decades. A positive HPV test can occur in people who have not been sexually active for many years.

It is generally impossible to know when HPV infection occurred. HPV infection is usually transient (not permanent) and will resolve on its own.

What does having HPV mean for me?

HPV is a common infection and often clears by natural immunity. Having HPV does not mean that a person has (or will get) cancer. Most people who have HPV do not develop abnormal cells or cancer.

Only a very small number of people with HPV infection will have cervical cell abnormalities or cervical cancer.

What is the process for cervical screening?

As of September 2023, there will be some changes to the National Cervical Screening Programme in Aotearoa New Zealand. The primary test will now be an HPV test, with the option of self-testing. This is a better first test for the prevention of cervical cancer.

While cervical screening previously involved a clinician using a speculum to complete a smear test, for most people this will no longer be necessary. In some instances, such as if you are immune deficient, a smear test may still be recommended and you can discuss this with your healthcare provider.

The HPV test can be done as a simple vaginal swab. You can choose whether you would like to do a self-test or have the swab performed by a clinician. Even when self-testing, this will need to be done by visiting a healthcare provider.

This test can be done through your GP, Family Planning, sexual health services, and community health services. There is usually a cost involved for this service. However, it has been announced that free cervical screening will be provided from September for people who have not previously been screened, Māori and Pacific people, and anyone who is a community service card holder.

Sometimes a second visit will be required for further testing. If a second visit would be impossible or very difficult - for example, if you're based in a remote or rural region - you may opt to have your initial HPV test done on a liquid smear specimen, which will need to be collected by a clinician through a smear test.

The HPV test is designed to identify those at a higher risk of cervical cancer at an early stage. More information on HPV testing is available on *www.timetoscreen.nz/cervical-screening*.

Cervical screening is primarily an HPV test which involves a vaginal swab. This can be done as a self-test or by a clinician.

How often do I need to have cervical screening?

The recommendation is that any person aged 25 to 69 years with a cervix should have cervical screening every five years. It is important to have these regular cervical screenings regardless of your gender identity and the gender identity of your sexual partners. It is also safe to undergo cervical screening while pregnant.

Under the previous cervical screening programme, cervical smears were recommended every three years. However, a negative HPV test under the new programme means there is very low risk of developing abnormal cells that may lead to cervical cancer within the next five years, so this means the gap between screenings can safely be extended.

If there is any reason why you should continue to have screenings every three years, your healthcare provider can discuss this with you. You should also have a negative HPV test before exiting screening at age 69.

People with a cervix aged 25 to 69 should have cervical screening every five years.

What happens if I have a positive HPV test?

If HPV is detected following your cervical screening, you will need to undergo additional testing. However, for many people HPV infection is cleared by the body's own immune system within months to a few years.

Many people who have HPV detected will not have any cell changes but it will still be necessary to have further investigation with cytology or colposcopy. The exact process depends on the type of HPV that is detected.

If HPV 16 or 18 is detected, you will be referred to a specialist clinic for further investigation using a procedure called colposcopy.

A colposcope is like a pair of medical binoculars on a stand and it magnifies the cells on the cervix. Colposcopy shows where the abnormal cells are. A tiny piece of tissue may be removed (a biopsy) which may cause brief discomfort. The biopsy is sent to a laboratory to confirm if an abnormality is present. These procedures are simple and require only a short visit to a hospital clinic or private specialist.

There are 12 other high-risk types of HPV that are tested for and if these are detected it is referred to as a positive test for HPV Other. Cytology testing (a cervical smear) will be used as a secondary test in these cases. If the cytology test is negative, you will be asked to return for another HPV test in 12-months.

If the cytology testing shows positive or definite high-grade changes then you will be referred to colposcopy. Treatment is generally only required if there are certain abnormal cell changes of the cervix.

If your cervical screening detects HPV you will need to undergo further testing. The exact process for this depends on the type of HPV that is detected and you will be advised by your healthcare provider.

What does this mean for my partner?

Partners will inevitably share HPV. This is normal. In new relationships, condoms do provide some protection against HPV and offer good protection from many other sexually transmitted infections.

It is not clear if there is any health benefit to informing (future) partners about a past diagnosis of genital HPV or warts. This is because it is not known how long the virus remains and for most people, the virus is either suppressed or cleared by the immune system.

Partners usually share HPV.

What about the future?

Most cervical cancers can be prevented by HPV vaccination, having regular cervical screening and following National Cervical Screening Programme (NCSP) recommended guidelines if any abnormalities are identified. There is no evidence that HPV will affect your ability to have children.

Smoking or vaping decreases the immune system's ability to deal with the wart virus and therefore may increase your risk of developing abnormal cell changes.

HPV vaccines

Vaccines are now available which provide protection from the most high risk HPV strains (the strains that are most likely to lead to abnormal cell changes).

The HPV vaccine (Gardasil 9) is registered for use in New Zealand for females and males aged 9–45 years. The vaccine is free for females and males aged 9–26 years (inclusive) as part of the Ministry of Health's HPV Immunisation Programme.

Cervical cancer can be prevented by HPV vaccination and having regular cervical screening.

Vaccination is most effective when given prior to HPV infection, i.e. before you start having sex. 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.

For further information please ask for our vaccine information pamphlet ***Preventing HPV Cancers by Vaccination*** or visit *www.hpv.org.nz*

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**
- National Cervical Screening Programme free phone **0800 729 729** or **www.timetoscreen.nz/cervical-screening**
- 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,
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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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