

STIEF 

HPV

and males



What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the world.

There are over 100 types of HPV. Some HPV types infect the genital area and may cause warts, i.e. "low-risk" (lr) HPV, types 6 and 11. Other HPV types may cause abnormal changes in your cells, these are "high-risk" (hr) HPV – most often types 16 and 18 – and can lead to cancer.

Most HPV infections are thought to clear naturally and do not cause health problems.

How is it transmitted?

Genital HPV is usually acquired by direct skin-to-skin contact during intimate sexual contact with someone who is infected. Most males are not aware that they have the virus.

Increasing your number of sexual partners does increase the risk of getting HPV, but the virus is so common it may be acquired after having only a single partner.

It is usually impossible to determine when or from whom HPV was caught.

Are males at risk from HPV?

HPV is an extremely common infection and most people are infected with HPV at some time in their lives. Infection with HPV is believed to occur quickly after sexual debut and the rate of infection in males does not appear to decline with age.

How does HPV affect males?

HPV can affect the ano-genital area and also the throat, in the form of genital warts, penile cancer, anal cancer and oropharyngeal (throat) cancer.

While HPV is a very common STI, genital warts are uncommon, and HPV-related cancers are rare. Infection with (hr) HPV places you at risk of developing HPV-related cancers, however the likelihood of an infection progressing to cancer is unknown but thought to be low.

HPV and penile cancer

HPV-related penile cancers most often affect the 'head' of the penis and are rare. It is reported that penile cancer is about 10 times less common than cervical cancer. Penile cancer is generally diagnosed in those over the age of 30 years and most commonly among those over 70 years.

Risk factors for HPV-related penile cancer include smoking, not being circumcised, having a previous diagnosis of genital warts, having a previous diagnosis of an STI, and number of sexual partners.

HPV and anal cancer

HPV-associated anal cancers are also becoming more common. In particular, gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM) are most at risk. HPV-associated anal cancer is now believed to affect MSM over 20 times more than heterosexual men.

Risk factors for HPV-associated anal cancer include smoking, ano-genital wart diagnosis, rectal STI diagnosis, anal intercourse, and number of sexual partners.

HPV and throat cancer

Cancers affecting the throat, and in particular the tonsils and back of the tongue, are becoming more common, especially in males. Whereas cancers in this area have traditionally been a result of smoking and alcohol intake, increasingly they are caused by HPV.

The types of HPV which cause throat cancer are the same as those which cause genital tract cancer, and in the majority of cases of HPV-associated throat cancer the virus is thought to be transmitted sexually, especially through oral sex.

These cancers may present with persistent throat pain and difficulty swallowing, but commonly the first sign of the disease is a lump in the neck.

HPV and males who are immunocompromised or living with HIV

People who are taking pharmaceuticals that suppress the immune system or who are living with HIV are at particular risk from HPV infection and developing HPV-associated cancer. A compromised immune system is less able to detect and fight the HPV virus.

Of particular concern is the burden of HPV-associated anal cancer experienced by MSM living with HIV, which is thought to be 100 times greater than the general population.

It is recommended that all males living with HIV, and particularly MSM living with HIV, undergo regular health checks including a digital anal rectal exam to look for signs or symptoms that may indicate HPV-associated cancers.

Screening for HPV-associated cancers

Unlike for cervical cancer, there is currently no effective screening test for HPV-related cancers affecting the throat or penile regions. However, work is being undertaken to assess strategies for anal cancer screening. For now, those with persistent symptoms affecting these areas, precancerous conditions, or a history of immunosuppression should discuss with their health provider.

How can I prevent HPV infection?

Vaccination against HPV before someone becomes sexually active offers the best protection against HPV. It is safe and effective and free of charge for males aged 9–26 years.

HPV is highly transmissible, can be passed on through a number of routes, and without vaccination almost everyone will be infected at some point in their lives.

Consistent condom use can offer some protection during sexual intercourse.

HPV and condom use

Condoms, used correctly from start to finish with each sexual encounter, will provide some protection from HPV. This will also reduce the risk of acquiring other sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia, HIV and gonorrhoea.

HPV and vaccination

The HPV vaccine (Gardasil 9) is registered for use in New Zealand for males aged 9–45 years.

The vaccine is free for anyone aged 9–26 years (inclusive) as part of the Ministry of Health's HPV Immunisation Programme (see *Preventing HPV Cancers by Vaccination* on www.hpv.org.nz).

Vaccination is most effective when given prior to HPV exposure, i.e. before sexual debut. For males 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.

Males over the age of 26 may also still benefit from vaccination as they may not have acquired all the strains covered by the vaccine.

If you are outside the currently funded groups, discuss options for vaccination with your GP. The cost for each dose is approximately \$180.00 and there is usually an appointment cost on top of this. This means the cost will be around \$650.00 for the full three doses.

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

This booklet is endorsed by **The Immunisation Advisory Centre**

Supported by an educational grant from **Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand**

© 2023 Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation

V.3, 12/23

