



The Human papilloma virus (HPV) and throat cancer

A large proportion of cancers of the tonsil and tongue base, the back of the tongue, are caused by the Human papilloma virus (HPV). Tests are done on patients with this type of cancer to find out if it is caused by HPV.

This information sheet addresses common questions which patients have when they understand that their cancer may be caused by HPV.

There are a range of different HPV viral types that can infect the human body. For example, certain types of HPV cause common skin warts. These do not normally develop into a cancer. Other types can infect the cervix of women and, in some cases, develop into cervical cancer. This is why young girls are now vaccinated against the types of HPV that cause cervical cancer. One of the types of HPV (HPV-16) associated with cervical cancer is also the main HPV viral type that causes throat cancer of the tonsil and tongue base.

Throat cancers caused by HPV and the chance of cure

The most important feature of throat cancers caused by HPV is that the chances of successful treatment and cure are good.

How does HPV infect the throat?

HPV infection of the mouth and the throat area is extremely common. Most of us will have an HPV infection of the mouth or throat area at some point in our lives, typically in young adulthood. Most people will clear oral/throat HPV infection within a year. However, a very small proportion of the normal population will not clear the infection and it will remain. Some individuals within that group may develop cancerous changes associated with this infection in the years later between 10 and 20 to 30 years later.

HPV is transmitted by normal sexual activity. Getting an HPV infection does not, in any way, imply any abnormal sexual practice or promiscuity. It is possible that it is transmitted through simple intimate mouth-to-mouth kissing, as well as other ways of transmission, such as oro-genital contact.

It is important to note that there is frequently a very long interval (decades) between the initial infection and the development of cancer in the very small proportion of people who go on to get a cancer. This means there is no suggestion that a patient who develops this type of throat cancer has been unfaithful. The same applies to their partner.

Are partners of patients with an HPV cancer at risk of HPV infection and HPV-related cancer?

Long term partners of patients with an HPV cancer of the throat are not at increased risk of acquiring HPV infection themselves of the throat. There is thought to be a slight increased risk of cervical cancer in the female partners of patients with an HPV throat cancer. It is recommended that partners of the patients with an HPV infection attend routine cervical screening with regular smears. No additional measures are needed.

HPV and vaccination.

Commercial vaccines (Gardasil and Cervarix) are available and include protection against HPV-16. The current Department of Health policy is to offer vaccination in pre-adolescent girls, primarily to prevent later cervical cancer. These vaccines do not work in any patient who has already been exposed to the virus. They have no benefit for a patient who has already had an HPV cancer and are highly unlikely to be effective in their partners, bearing in mind that most people have had HPV infection at some point in their lives after adolescence.

Summary.

HPV infection of the throat is common in young adults. Most people clear the virus. In a small proportion of patients who do not clear the virus, a cancer of the throat can develop many years later. Throat cancers caused by HPV are associated with good cure rates.

An HPV throat cancer does not imply any abnormal sexual practice by the patient nor their partner. A patient with an HPV cancer will not spread the virus or the cancer and is in no way "infectious".