

PATIENT INFORMATION

Oropharynx Cancer

WHAT IS HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)?

HPV is a virus most of us have been exposed to. There are many different types (over a hundred), and most do not cause cancer. HPV often causes warts or verruca. Sometimes, it can also cause cancer. The 'oropharynx' is a medical term used to describe the area at the back of your mouth including your tonsils, soft palate and tongue base. HPV can cause cancer in this part of the throat. HPV is more commonly associated with cancer of the cervix, but it can also cause cancer of the anus and genitals. Sexually active people are at risk from HPV cancers and as HPV is very common, more than 80% of sexually active adults are infected at some point during their lifetime although most will never be aware of this. For most people the immune system helps to clear these infections within a year or two. Among those who do not clear their infection, persistent infection can lead to pre-cancer and cancer. Oropharynx HPV infection is significantly less common than genital HPV infection and more common among men than women.

WHEN DID I GET AN OROPHARYNX HPV INFECTION?

At the moment researchers do not know how long it takes from the time of HPV infection to the time of a diagnosis with HPV cancer, although studies have shown that HPV infections may happen 10-15 or more years before development and diagnosis of oropharynx cancer.

HOW DID I GET AN OROPHARYNX HPV INFECTION?

There are a number of factors that increase our risk of oropharynx HPV infection. These include higher numbers of sexual partners, including oral sex partners. However, it is very important to understand the presence of HPV infection is not a marker of promiscuity. Some people with an oropharynx HPV infection report never having performed oral sex or have only had a few lifetime oral sex partners. It is also important to understand that being diagnosed with HPV cancer does not imply that

either partner/spouse has been unfaithful in any way. Many people are exposed to HPV during their lifetime, few become infected and even fewer develop cancer.

WILL MY SPOUSE/PARTNER ALSO HAVE HPV INFECTION AND DEVELOP CANCER?

As HPV can be a sexually transmitted infection, couples that have been intimate are likely to have already exposed each other to their sexual infections. There are no current recommendations to change sexual behaviours in established relationships. However, condom use with future partners is recommended as with any other sexually transmitted infection. Partners/spouses of patients diagnosed with HPV oropharynx cancer may have a slightly higher risk of HPV associated cancers such as anus, genital and oropharynx, than the general population, but these are still rare cancers and the chances of developing these cancers remain low. There are presently no screening guidelines for HPV associated oropharynx cancers, therefore, with the exception of cervical cancer screening guidelines, there are no additional recommendations for sexual partners/spouses of patients diagnosed with HPV oropharynx cancer.

WHAT DOES BEING HPV POSITIVE MEAN FOR MY DISEASE?

We test all oropharynx tumours for HPV status. Currently all oropharynx cancer tumour treatment options are the same (The doctor and nurse will discuss these with you). However, research has shown that most patients diagnosed with HPV positive tumours may have better overall survival than patients who have tumours not caused by HPV; this is because HPV positive tumours usually respond better to treatment. Patients who smoke and drink alcohol are advised to reduce/stop, (please ask your nurse, doctor or GP for advice). Current tobacco use may increase the likelihood or increase the persistence of an oropharynx HPV infection. Smoking and alcohol are the main causative risk factors of all Head and Neck Cancers, whether HPV-positive or HPV-negative.

CAN THE HPV VACCINES HELP?

In the UK, a vaccine called Gardasil currently protects against HPV types 6, 11, 16 and 18. It is offered to those between 12-26 years before their first sexual experience. The vaccine does not help clear an infection acquired prior to vaccination. It is given to protect against cervical/anal cancer and warts. It is not yet known whether the vaccine will also prevent oropharynx cancer, but it is likely to. It is unlikely that spouses/partners of HPV oral cancer patients would benefit from the vaccine as they have already been exposed to HPV.

Useful contacts:

- **Head and Neck Specialist Nurses**
- 📞 **(01803) 655044.**
- **<http://www.oralcancerfoundation.org/facts/humanpapillomavirus.htm>**

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.