

# THE MEDICAL PRACTICE AT 48 WIMPOLE STREET

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## **HPV Fact sheet**

### **Introduction**

Following a smear test or colposcopy you may have been told that the tests have shown HPV or wart virus infection on your cervix. This leaflet gives you more information about HPV and explains why you should continue to have regular smears. HPV is a very common infection that rarely causes problems. For some women, however, if the infection persists, changes on the cervix can take place. These changes are often referred to as 'pre-cancerous' as they may sometimes progress to cancer if left untreated. So, although cervical cancer is very rare, we do know that it is linked to certain types of HPV infection. For this reason it is important that you are aware of what HPV is and what should be done about it.

### **What is HPV?**

Human papillomaviruses are a large family of viruses that affect skin and mucous membranes (such as the mouth and the genitals). There are over 100 types and the commonest infections are warts on the hands or veruccas on the feet. A small number can affect the genital tract including the cervix.

### **Who gets HPV?**

HPV, with or without genital warts can infect sexually active men and women of all ages, races, social classes and sexual orientation. Even a baby can get HPV from its mother's birth canal, although this is extremely rare. HPV is so common that most sexually active people will be exposed to it at some time in their life.

### **How do you get HPV?**

Genital HPV is spread by direct skin to skin contact during sex with someone who has the infection. It is not caused by touching warts or veruccas, which are caused by different types of the virus. Some protection may be offered by using condoms although they will not cover all of the susceptible areas. Very little is known about the transmission of HPVs associated with cervical changes. Some experts think it may be less contagious than visible genital warts. The only way to avoid catching HPV is by not having sex with anyone, or by having sex with one unaffected partner who only has sex with you. People who have sex with many partners are more at risk of getting any type of sexually transmitted disease, and if you have been exposed to one type of the virus then you may also have been exposed to others. HPV can be contracted by one person, remain dormant for many years and then be passed on unknowingly to another many years later.

### **How do you know you have HPV?**

You may become aware that you have been infected with HPV because you develop genital warts, although sometimes people don't notice these when they are inside the vagina. Some types of virus do not cause visible warts but cause changes in the cervix that show up as an abnormal smear. Many people with HPV will not have obvious symptoms and will not know they have it.

### **How long before you develop symptoms?**

It can take months or even years for someone exposed to HPV to become aware of it. If you are exposed to types that cause warts then these can appear within a few weeks but may sometimes develop months or even years later. In most people the body successfully controls the virus and it

may be cleared or remain dormant without causing any obvious signs. If you are exposed to the types of HPV that cause cell changes on the cervix then it may take many years for this to show as an abnormal smear.

### **What treatment is there for HPV?**

At the moment there are no reliable treatments for getting rid of HPV. It is usually cleared in time by the body's immune reaction. There are some treatments for warts that aim to give the body's natural immunity a boost. We can, however treat the changes caused by HPV. Visible warts can be treated by chemical destruction using liquids or gels, by freezing, by burning, or by laser treatment. The goal of treating warts is to get rid of annoying symptoms and reduce the risk of passing on the infection. Changes on the cervix caused by HPV can be treated in a similar way if they don't go away naturally. They can be investigated further with colposcopy (where your cervix is examined using a special microscope). Most colposcopy clinics either remove the affected area using 'loop treatment' or destroy the area by 'coagulation', 'cryocautery (freezing)' or 'laser vaporisation'. As the treatments are not guaranteed to get rid of the virus (only the changes caused by it) it is important to continue to have regular smears.

### **Does HPV cause cancer?**

The short answer to this is that some types of HPV extremely rarely cause cancer. However HPV infection is very common, and so for the vast majority of us it will never present a problem. Most of the HPV types that cause visible warts do not cause cancer. For those unlucky enough to get a problem with HPV and have an abnormal smear, the changes take many years and should be detected through regular screening. This is why we advise regular cervical smear tests for sexually active women aged between 20 and 64. Furthermore, at an early stage, the changes caused by HPV can be treated very easily and effectively.

### **What about HPV and pregnancy**

HPV does not seem to pose a problem in pregnancy although some women may notice a flare up in their symptoms from visible warts. This is probably due to the normal changes in the immune system that occur in pregnancy. Transmission to your baby is very rare. Having genital warts at the time of delivery is not a reason to avoid having a normal delivery, but you should tell your midwife that you have warts.

### **Is it normal to feel emotional or upset about having HPV?**

Yes. Some people feel very upset. They may feel ashamed, less attractive and as a result may become less interested in sex. They may feel anger towards their sexual partner(s), even though it is usually impossible to know when or from whom the virus was contracted. Some people are understandably worried that the infection could lead to cancer.