Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

HPV and Head and Neck Cancer: What Do I Need to Know?

This information explains HPV and how it can cause head and neck cancers.

What is HPV?

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) is a virus that can infect the skin and the mucosa (lining) of your mouth, throat, genitals, and anal area. Infections with HPV are common. Most people with HPV don’t have any symptoms. Their immune system will get rid of the HPV infection without any treatment. In some cases, HPV can lead to cancer. We don’t know why some people can get rid of their HPV infection before it causes cancer, and others can’t.

Are there different types of HPV?

Yes, there are different types of HPV. Some types of HPV can cause warts on the skin, mouth, or genitals. Other types can lead to cancer. These are known as high-risk types. High-risk HPV can cause different types of cancer, including cancer of the cervix, vulva, penis, and anus.

High-risk HPV can also cause head and neck cancer in both men and women.

How do people get HPV?

HPV can spread when your skin or mucosa comes in contact with an infected person’s skin or mucosa. This usually happens by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has the virus. HPV is common and usually does not cause any symptoms. That makes it hard to know exactly when the infection started or who passed it on. Cancer may develop years after having sex with someone who is infected with the HPV virus.

Can I spread HPV?

HPV isn’t spread through physical contact, such as touching hands, and kissing on the cheek or lips. HPV is contagious (spread) through vaginal, anal, and oral sex. This means that if you have HPV, it’s likely that your sexual partners also have HPV. Most people get rid of the infection on their own. Your partner has a low risk of getting cancer from HPV, even if they have a high-risk type of HPV. You don’t need to change how you have sex if you have cancer caused by HPV.

Can HPV be cured?

At this time, there is no cure for HPV infections. Most people infected with HPV will get rid of the infection without any treatment.

Should my partner be screened for HPV?

- If your partner is a woman, they should follow standard women’s health guidelines, including having a routine Pap test.
- If your partner is a man, they don’t need any special exams or tests. There is no routine or standard HPV screening for men.

Your partner’s chance of getting cancer because of an HPV infection is very low. They should talk with their healthcare provider about their symptoms or concerns.

How can I avoid getting HPV or giving someone HPV?

Every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex, use dental dams or condoms. A dental dam is a thin, rectangular sheet of latex or silicone that covers a woman’s genitals during oral sex. Condoms and dental dams can lower your chances of getting HPV. But they give less protection from HPV than from other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia and HIV.

You should consider getting the HPV vaccine, and encouraging your partner to get one, too.

Should I get the HPV vaccine?

Anyone aged 9 to 45 can get the HPV vaccine to protect against genital warts and different types of HPV that can cause cancer. It’s recommended that children get the vaccine at age 11 or 12 so they’re protected years before they become sexually active.

At any age, talk with your healthcare provider to find out if the HPV vaccine is right for you.

If I already have an HPV infection, can the vaccine treat it?

The HPV vaccine can’t treat an HPV infection. It can protect you from getting other types of HPV.

If you have an HPV infection, talk with your healthcare provider about tests or treatment you need.

How does HPV cause head and neck cancer?

We don’t know for sure how HPV causes head and neck cancer. Most head and neck cancers caused by HPV are in the throat, in the base of the tongue and the tonsils. Most people who have high-risk HPV won’t get cancer. However, some people aren’t able to get rid of their HPV infection. When this happens, the virus can cause damage that makes a tumor grow. It often takes many years for the cancer to grow. We do not have a test to help predict whether an infection will go away or cause cancer.

How do I know if HPV caused my cancer?

When a head and neck cancer is diagnosed, the tumor itself can be tested for HPV. Right now, this is the only way to test if a cancer is caused by HPV.

Can I get another cancer from HPV?

The risk of getting a second cancer from HPV is low. Your healthcare providers will examine you regularly. Be sure to tell your healthcare providers about any new symptoms or concerns.

Does having HPV change my treatment or my chance of being cured?

People with head and neck cancer caused by HPV respond to treatment better than people who don’t have cancer caused by HPV. Both types of cancers are treated the same way. Treatment decisions are based on the tumor’s size and location, the stage of the disease, and a person’s general health. Researchers are studying whether cancer treatments should change when HPV is involved.

What about tobacco and alcohol?

People who misuse alcohol or use tobacco are more likely to get head and neck cancer. However, cancers caused by HPV can develop whether or not you drink alcohol or use tobacco products. People with cancer who do not use tobacco or alcohol live longer. They are less likely to develop new cancers. People with head and neck cancer should stop using tobacco and limit their use of alcohol. If you need help changing these habits, MSK can help you. Ask your healthcare provider for more information about our programs, or call the Counseling Center at 646-888-0200.

Resources

Information about HPV and cancer on the Internet can be confusing and incorrect. We recommend you get accurate information from these organizations:

American Cancer Society (ACS)
www.cancer.org
800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/default.htm

Support for People with Oral and Head and Neck Cancer (SPOHNC)
www.spohnc.org
800-377-0928

If you have any questions, contact a member of your care team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5 p.m., during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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