

Information about  
**HPV**

# Human papillomavirus (HPV)

Jo's cervical  
cancer trust



[jostrust.org.uk](http://jostrust.org.uk)

## About this information

This information is for anyone who wants to know more about the human papillomavirus (HPV). It includes:

- what HPV is
  - types of HPV and how people get it
  - how HPV is linked to cervical cancer
  - tests for HPV
  - ways to reduce your risk of HPV.
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## What is HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that is passed on through skin-to-skin contact.

4 out of 5 (80%) of us will have HPV at some point in our lives, but our immune system usually gets rid of it. We may not even know we had it!

“When I realised how common HPV was, my guilt did subside. There wasn’t much else I could have done to protect myself from HPV – the vaccine wasn’t available when I was at school...It was just that my body didn’t clear it. But what I did do was go for my cervical screening!”

Laura, a service user and Jo’s volunteer

# Types of HPV

There are over 200 different types of HPV.

## Genital HPV

About 40 HPV types affect the genital areas of men and women. The genital area includes:

- the skin of the penis
- vulva (area outside the vagina)
- anus (back passage)
- the linings of the vagina, cervix, and rectum.

Some of these HPV types can cause conditions like genital warts – visit [jostrust.org.uk/genitalwarts](http://jostrust.org.uk/genitalwarts) for more information.

## High-risk HPV

Around 13 of these 40 HPV types are linked to cancer. We call these high-risk HPV. High-risk HPV causes 5% of all cancers and almost all (99.7%) cervical cancers. Remember, most people with high-risk HPV will not develop cervical cancer.

## How do people get genital HPV?

Genital HPV is passed on through skin-to-skin contact, including:

- vaginal, anal and oral sex
- touching in the genital area
- sharing sex toys.

HPV can be inactive (dormant) for many years, so it is hard to know when you got HPV or who you got it from. If you have a partner, getting HPV does not mean they have been unfaithful.

## How does HPV cause cervical cancer?

It is important to remember that having HPV does not mean you will definitely get cervical cancer. Our immune system usually gets rid of HPV.

### How does an HPV infection develop?

For a small number of women, their immune system can't get rid of HPV.

If this happens, HPV may stay in the body for many years. This is called a persistent infection. Over time, a persistent infection with high-risk HPV can cause changes to the cells of the cervix. We sometimes call these changes abnormal cells.

Cell changes may develop into cervical cancer if they are not monitored or treated. The time between getting HPV and developing cell changes or cervical cancer varies from person to person, but often takes many years.

### Why can't we all get rid of HPV?

We don't know why some people get rid of HPV, while others may develop cell changes or possibly cervical cancer. This is why going for cervical screening when invited can help prevent cervical cancer, as well as having the HPV vaccine if you are eligible.

We have more information about HPV at [jostrust.org.uk/HPV](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/HPV)

## Is there a test for HPV?

In the UK, there are 3 tests for HPV:

### HPV primary screening

HPV primary screening is a type of test done on the sample of cells taken at your cervical screening (smear test) appointment. It is sometimes called HPV primary testing.

It means your cells will be tested for high-risk HPV first, instead of for changes. Your appointment and how the test is done will stay exactly the same.

HPV primary screening will start:

- in Wales from September 2018
- in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland exact dates are to be confirmed, but will likely be from late 2019 onwards.

It is a more accurate way of identifying who may be more at risk of developing cell changes or cervical cancer.

Visit [jostrust.org.uk/smeartest](http://jostrust.org.uk/smeartest) for more information.

### Other HPV tests

After treatment for cell changes, you have an HPV test at your follow-up appointment – usually 6 months after treatment. It is called ‘test of cure’ and checks your treatment was successful.

In England and Northern Ireland, your sample of cells may be tested for HPV if you have low-grade cell changes. This is called ‘HPV triage’ and helps decide whether you need treatment or monitoring. Scotland and Wales do not offer HPV triage.

# Reducing your risk of a persistent HPV infection

You can reduce your risk of a persistent HPV infection by:

## Not smoking

Smoking stops your immune system working properly, making it harder to fight infection. If you smoke, stopping smoking means you are more likely to be able to get rid of an HPV infection.

## Having safe sex

Using condoms or a dental dam helps reduce the risk of getting HPV, but it does not completely get rid of the risk. A condom only covers the penis and a dental dam only covers a specific area, but HPV lives on the skin in and around the whole genital area.

## Having the HPV vaccine

Depending on where you live in the UK, younger women between the ages of 11 and 18 can have the HPV vaccine (jab) for free at school or their GP.

The HPV vaccine protects against:

- 2 types of high-risk HPV that cause 70% of all cervical cancers
- 2 other types of HPV that cause 90% of genital warts.

We have more information about the HPV vaccine on our website – visit [jostrust.org.uk/hpv-vaccine](https://www.jostrust.org.uk/hpv-vaccine)

## More information and support

HPV is complicated and you are not alone if you haven't heard of HPV before or don't fully understand it. But we are here to help.

You can give our Helpline a call on **0808 802 8000** or join our online forum at **[jostrust.org.uk/forum](https://jostrust.org.uk/forum)** and chat to others with similar questions or experiences.

You can also use our Ask the Expert service for any medical questions – visit **[jostrust.org.uk/ask-expert](https://jostrust.org.uk/ask-expert)**

### Can you help Jo's reach more people?

We rely on your generous donations to help us provide support and information to the people who need it. If you find this booklet helpful, please consider making a donation.

Visit **[jostrust.org.uk/donate](https://jostrust.org.uk/donate)**

Cervical cancer can be prevented. We're doing something about it by providing information and support to everyone who needs it. We have information about:

- HPV vaccine
- Cervical screening
- Cell changes (abnormal cells)
- Cervical cancer

For more support, visit [jostrust.org.uk](https://jostrust.org.uk), call our Helpline on **0808 802 8000** or chat with others at [jostrust.org.uk/forum](https://jostrust.org.uk/forum)



We are a member of the Patient Information Forum (PIF), an independent, not-for-profit organisation that supports high quality, evidence-based health information.

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