

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Head and Neck Cancer

What is the Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?

Human papillomavirus (pap-i-LO-mah-vi-rus) or **HPV** is a very common virus in men and women. There are over 200 different types of HPV viruses. Most have no known long-term effects on your body and are considered “low-risk”. “High-risk” HPV infections can cause serious health problems and lead to cell changes.

What is the link between HPV infection and cancer?

In most cases, your body fights and kills the HPV infection. If this does not happen, your body’s cells can change and over time may lead to cancer. HPV-related cancers can happen in different areas of the body. Most often, these cancers are found in a woman’s cervix or areas in the head and neck.

HPV that is found in your mouth and throat is called “**Oral HPV**”. Some types of HPV can cause cancer of the tonsils, base of the tongue and back of the tongue. These cancers are called “oropharyngeal cancers”.

HPV cancers found in your head and neck can happen whether you smoke or not, but smokers are at greater risk. The only way to tell if a cancer is caused by HPV is to do a biopsy. A biopsy is a procedure done to remove a small sample of tissue. A special doctor (pathologist) will look at the tissue sample under a microscope to check for HPV.

How is HPV spread?

It may take many years for an HPV infection to lead to cancer. HPV can be passed through direct contact, such as skin-to-skin contact, most often with the mouth or genital areas. There is a higher risk of HPV

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being spread if the skin that has been touched has an open area, such as a cut, or if the skin is irritated. HPV can be passed from person to person, through saliva, during oral, vaginal or anal sex or by sharing certain sex toys. HPV is not spread through the air.

There are certain risk factors that may increase the chance of an HPV infection leading to cancer. These include if you:

- Were young when you first had sexual activity
- Had multiple sexual partners
- Had unprotected sex or were involved in other high-risk sexual activities

Tobacco and alcohol abuse may increase your chance of HPV infection. Risk of cancer of the mouth and throat is also higher with poor oral hygiene. Risk of HPV infection is higher if you have a weak immune system. Some medicines and other health problems, like HIV or AIDS can lower your immune system.

What are the symptoms of HPV-related head and neck cancer?

Symptoms depend on which type of HPV caused your infection. Some types of HPV do not cause symptoms and you may not even know you have the virus. Often, there are not any changes you can see in your body when you get this infection. As a result, HPV may be passed on to others without anyone knowing.

When one of the “high-risk” types of HPV infection stay in your body and is **not** destroyed by your immune system, it can lead to cancer. Symptoms may appear when the cancer or tumor begins to grow.

A common type of HPV-related cancer is found in certain areas of the head and neck. Some of the symptoms of HPV-related head and neck cancer may include:

- An ulcer or sore in your mouth, lip or throat that does not heal in 2 to 3 weeks
- A red, white or black area on the soft tissue of your mouth
- Difficult or painful swallowing
- A swollen, but painless tonsil
- Pain when you chew or swallow

- A persistent sore throat or hoarse voice
- Swelling or a lump in your mouth
- A painless lump felt on the outside of your neck that has been there for over 2 weeks
- A numb feeling in your mouth or lips
- Constant coughing
- An earache on one side that lasts for more than a few days
- Weight loss

How is HPV-related head and neck cancer treated?

Treatment options for HPV-related cancers may include surgery, radiation and chemotherapy. Your treatment will depend on your type of cancer and the amount (stage) of the disease. Your doctor will talk with you about what treatment is best for you.