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 and 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 are able to get rid of their HPV infection before it causes cancer, and why 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. The most common type is cervical cancer. This is why women get Pap tests (also called Pap smears, a test to check for cervical cancer), which include checking for HPV.

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. Because HPV is so common, it’s hard to know exactly when the infection started or who passed it on. You may also start having symptoms of HPV years after you have sex with someone who is infected. This makes it hard to know when you first became infected.
Am I contagious?

HPV isn’t spread through physical contact (such as touching and kissing on the cheek or lips), but HPV is contagious through vaginal, anal, and oral sex. This means that if you have HPV, it’s likely that your sexual partners may also have HPV. Since most people get rid of the infection on their own, the chance of your partner getting cancer caused by HPV is very low, even if they have a high-risk type. If you have cancer caused by HPV, you don’t need to make any changes in your sexual practices.

Can HPV be cured?

At this time, there is no cure for HPV infection. 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 female, they should follow normal women’s health guidelines, which include having a routine Pap test.
- If your partner is male, they don’t need any special exams or tests because there is no routine or standard HPV screening offered for men.

Your partner’s chance of getting cancer because of HPV infection is very low. They should discuss their symptoms or concerns with their doctor.

How can I avoid getting or giving someone HPV?

Condoms and dental dams (a thin, rectangular sheet of latex or silicone that covers the genitals of a woman receiving oral sex) aren’t as effective against HPV as they are against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia and HIV, but they can lower your chances of getting HPV. Use condoms or dental dams every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

You should also get the HPV vaccine and encourage your partner to do the same.
**Should I get the HPV vaccine?**

All people ages 9 to 26 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.

The vaccine isn’t usually given to people older than 26. But regardless of your age, talk with your doctor to find out if the HPV vaccine could benefit you.

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

If you already have an HPV infection, getting the HPV vaccine can’t treat it, but it can protect you from getting other types of HPV.

If you have an HPV infection, talk with your doctor or nurse to find out what 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 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 eventually causes a tumor to grow. It often takes many years for the HPV infected cells to become cancerous. We can’t predict whose infection will disappear and who will develop cancer. Most head and neck cancers caused by HPV form in the part of the throat that includes the base of the tongue and the tonsils.

**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, but your doctors will continue to examine you regularly. Be sure to tell your doctors about any new symptoms or concerns.

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

People with head and neck cancer caused by HPV respond to treatment better than people with head and neck cancer that isn’t caused by HPV. However, both types of cancers are treated the same way. Treatment decisions are made based on the size and location of the tumor, the stage of the disease, and the overall health of the person. Researchers are studying if cancer treatments should be changed based on if HPV is involved.

What about tobacco and alcohol?

People who abuse 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 don’t use tobacco or alcohol live longer and are less likely to develop new cancers. For this reason, 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 doctor or nurse for more information about our programs, or call the Counseling Center at 646-888-0200.

Resources

There is a lot of information about HPV and cancer on the Internet, but some of it is confusing and inaccurate. We recommend the following organizations for more information:

American Cancer Society (ACS)
www.cancer.org
800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345)
If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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