

Human Papillomavirus and Oropharyngeal Cancer Risk

Human Papillomavirus Infection [HPV infection] is caused by the human papillomavirus [HPV], and is the main cause of oropharyngeal cancer. Oropharyngeal cancer occurs in the back of the mouth, the base of the tongue and the tonsils.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. *How is HPV transmitted?*

- The major risk factor for HPV is sexual behavior. The virus is transmitted through sexual activity, primarily with someone previously infected.
- It is the most common sexually transmitted infection. More than half of sexually active people will acquire HPV in their lifetime.

2. *How would I know if I have an HPV infection?*

- Usually there are no symptoms of an HPV infection, and in the majority of cases the body's immune system resolves the infection in a few years. Many people never know they have been infected.
- In some people if an HPV infection persists, it may result in either genital or oral warts.
- The only way to know if an HPV infection is present is to have the suspicious lesion or area biopsied for the virus.

3. *Are there any ways of preventing an HPV infection?*

- The practice of safe sex during sexual activity is only partially effective. Only total abstinence from all sexual activity will provide complete protection.
- The HPV vaccine will provide protection unless one has already been exposed to the virus.
- Vaccination is therefore recommended for children beginning at age 11, before they become sexually active.

4. *What can I do if I'm concerned that I may have an HPV infection?*

- If sexually active, practice safe sex to reduce the risk of transmission.
- Inform your health care providers if you have any lesions in your mouth or genital area that have persisted for more than two weeks. While most of these are benign, there may be an increased risk of oropharyngeal and other cancers.
- Have regular dental and medical exams to evaluate for signs or symptoms of oropharyngeal and other cancers.