

What is Human Papilloma Virus?

Genital **Human Papilloma Virus** infection (HPV) is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a virus commonly known as 'wart virus'. Most people who get HPV do not have symptoms and will recover from the infection without treatment. In a small number of patients, however, the virus can persist and contribute to the development of cervical and other cancers including oropharyngeal and anal cancers.

About the virus

Human Papilloma Viruses are a group of about 100 different subtypes (genotypes). There are both 'high-risk' and 'low-risk' viruses in this group.

The commonest presentation of HPV is the 'common wart' on the skin and soles of the feet, but HPV can also infect the skin in and around the penis, vulva, anus, and the linings of the vagina, cervix, and rectum.

Some high-risk genotypes of HPV viruses (commonly types 16 and 18) can cause significant abnormalities that are detectable in the Pap smear test. These abnormalities very rarely will progress to cancer.

The low-risk (HPV types 6 and 11) can also cause mild Pap test abnormalities or obvious, visible genital warts.

How do people get genital HPV infection?

Genital HPV infection is common. About 50% of sexually active men and women will acquire an HPV infection sometime during their life. HPV is transmitted through sexual intercourse. Because the majority of infections do not cause symptoms, people who have HPV do not know that they are infected and can pass on the virus to their sexual partners.

It is also possible for a pregnant woman to give the virus to her baby when it passes through the birth canal, although this is very rare. Babies exposed to the virus in this way can develop warts in their throat or voice box later in life.

Diagnosis of genital HPV infection

Until recently, the presence of HPV was detected by an abnormal Pap smear, which is the screening test for cervical cancer. On 1 December 2017 however, Pap smears will be replaced with HPV screening of high risk genotypes in specimens collected for a Pap smear (e.g. thin prep).

At Sullivan Nicolaides Pathology, a test to detect the high-risk types of HPV in ThinPreps is now available. It is important to note that the test does not show the presence or absence of low-risk types of HPV, so is not able to answer the question 'Do I have HPV infection of any type?'. Medicare will pay for the test only for those women who have had treatment of abnormalities detected in the cervix, to ensure that high-risk HPV types are no longer present.

If the test is performed for any other reason, there is no Medicare rebate.

Is there a vaccine?

Two vaccines are now licensed to protect against HPV infection. These include Gardasil (protects against 6, 11, 16 and 18): licensed for females aged 9 to 45 years and males aged 9 to 26 years; and Cervarix (protects against 16 and 18): licensed for females aged 10 to 45 years.

These vaccines are prophylactic only and do not treat infection or prevent disease that has been acquired prior to vaccination. It is important that regular screening for cervical cancer is still performed even if vaccinated.