

*FACT SHEET 1*

# HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)

This series of health education materials is designed to provide information to primary health care providers and the general public about the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer prevention and control.

The series is comprised of the following health education materials:

**FACT SHEET 1:**

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV)

**FACT SHEET 2:**

HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS (HPV) VACCINES

**FACT SHEET 3:**

WHAT IS CERVICAL CANCER?

**FACT SHEET 4:**

EARLY DETECTION TESTS TO PREVENT CERVICAL CANCER

**FACT SHEET 5:**

TREATMENT OF CERVICAL CANCER



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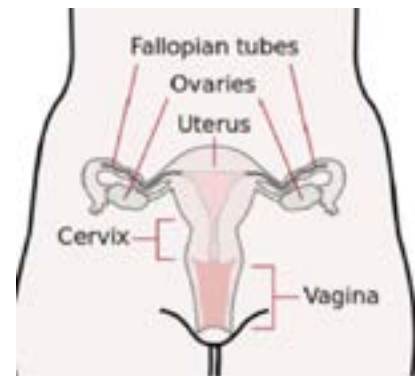
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CERVICAL CANCER  
PREVENTION IN LATIN AMERICA  
AND THE CARIBBEAN



*This health education material provides information on the human papillomavirus and how it causes cervical cancer.*



## WHAT IS THE HUMAN PAPILOMAVIRUS?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus, transmitted through skin to skin sexual contact. Most people will have an HPV infection during their lifetime, even though they do not know they have it and many may not have any signs or symptoms of infection. HPV can infect both women and men. HPV infection usually clears on its own with the body's immune system. However, in some people, HPV infection may persist over time.

*There are more than 100 HPV types, and each type is identified by a number. Some HPV types can cause genital or anal warts. Other HPV types can cause cancer, most commonly cervical cancer. HPV infection is also a risk factor for vaginal, penile, anal, mouth and throat cancers.*

**For cervical cancer, persistent infection from HPV can cause changes in the cells of the cervix, known as pre-cancer lesions. Pre-cancer lesions are the pre-stage for cervical cancer. These lesions can lead to cervical cancer if they are not detected or treated.**

Genital warts caused by the HPV virus can disappear on their own or may require treatment, but do not cause cancer.

*Cervical cancer can be treated and cured, if detected early. If not treated, cervical cancer is almost always fatal.*

## WHAT ARE THE HPV TYPES AND WHAT DO THEY CAUSE?

*There are high and low-risk HPV types:*

- \* **Low-risk HPV types cause genital warts in men and women.** Among the most common of these HPV types are HPV 6 and 11 and some of the available HPV vaccines offer protection against these types.
- \* **High-risk HPV types can cause cancer.** The main cause of cervical cancer is persistent infection with one or more high risk HPV types that cause abnormal changes in the cervical cells. Among the most common of these HPV types are HPV 16 and 18, and HPV vaccines offer protection against these types.

## CAN HPV INFECTION BE PREVENTED?

HPV infection is very common and most people become infected after beginning their sexual life. HPV infection can be prevented by HPV vaccines, recommended for girls aged 9-14 years prior to the age of beginning sexual life. Some country guidelines also recommend HPV vaccination for boys.

It is very important to educate girls and boys about sexual health and HPV infection, with age-appropriate and culturally relevant messages. In adolescents who have initiated sexual activity, sexual health messages should include information about HPV infection and cervical cancer screening, as well as condom use. The use of condoms does not provide full protection against HPV, but it protects against other sexual transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. HPV infection is not prevented with personal hygiene measures.

## HOW IS AN HPV INFECTION DETECTED?

Infection by HPV can be detected with the HPV test, given to women during a gynecological exam. The HPV test is a relatively new test, that is not available in all countries. An HPV test is generally given to women over 30 years of age to detect HPV infection. In younger women, HPV infection is very common, and in most cases the infection clears by itself.

If an HPV infection is detected, there is a greater risk for the woman to develop precancerous lesions in her cervix. For this reason, it is very important that women detected with an HPV infection receive follow up medical care and treatment for precancerous lesions, as needed. If precancerous lesions are left untreated, it will likely develop into cervical cancer.

## CAN HPV INFECTION BE TREATED?

There is no treatment for the virus, but there is treatment for the health problems caused by HPV infection.

### \* **Genital warts**

Genital warts are visible, soft, moist, and skin-colored bumps. In women, warts are found around the vagina, cervix or anus. In men, genital warts may appear on the tip of the penis. Warts caused by HPV may disappear on their own or may require treatment. It is possible for warts to go away spontaneously, and re-appear again. Medical care should be sought for wart removal.

### \* **Precancerous cervical lesions**

If a screening test detects changes in the cervical cells, a woman will usually need another test by a medical doctor during a gynecological exam. This is called colposcopy, and may be performed with or without a biopsy. If a precancerous lesion is diagnosed, treatment is given to prevent the development of cervical cancer. Treatment involves removing the lesions.

Detection of HPV infection, and screening for precancerous lesions followed by timely treatment are essential for the prevention of cervical cancer.

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## SOURCES OF INFORMATION:

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- » National Cancer Institute, NCI. Significance of changes in the cervix. Guide to Women's Health.
- » Government of Australia. School HPV Vaccination Program.
- » Public Health Agency of Canada. HPV and Men: Questions and Answers.

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