

FAQs HPV and Cervical Screening



1. *What is HPV?*

HPV stands for 'human papillomavirus'. The term HPV is used to refer to a group of more than 100 viruses. High-risk strains of HPV can cause certain types of cancer to develop.

2. *How do you contract HPV?*

HPV can be contracted through any genital skin-to-skin contact, but it can also be passed through sexual contact, including vaginal, anal, oral, and non-penetrative sex.

3. *Does HPV have any symptoms?*

It often has no symptoms, so this can make it difficult to determine when you first contracted it. It's also possible to have HPV for a number of years before developing any symptoms.

4. *How common is HPV?*

Most people contract HPV at some point in their lives and may not even be aware that they have it, and it is particularly common in people in their late teens and early 20s. Most infections don't need treatment because your body clears the virus by itself.

5. *Do condoms prevent the spread of HPV?*

Condoms are great at preventing the spread of many sexually transmitted infections (STIs), however, as HPV can be transferred from skin-to-skin contact, condoms may not prevent you from catching HPV.

6. *Isn't there a vaccine for HPV?*

HPV vaccination is offered to all first-year post-primary students in Ireland. The vaccine helps protect (several) high-risk HPV types and also 2 that cause genital warts.

7. *What are the links between HPV and cancer?*

Certain high-risk types of HPV can cause abnormal, or pre-cancerous, cells to develop in your body. This can lead to the development of certain cancers in both women and men, including cervical cancer, vulval cancer, vaginal cancer, anal cancer, and cancer of the penis. HPV is also linked to cancers of the mouth and tongue.

8. *Is there any way of knowing if I have HPV?*

Testing is available for women and people with cervixes through HPV cervical screening services. Unfortunately, there currently aren't any screening services available for men and people with penises.

9. *Do I need cervical screening?*

If you're aged 25-65, a woman or a person with a cervix, and have ever had sexual contact, you should have cervical screening as you might have high-risk HPV which can cause abnormal, or pre-cancerous, cells to grow around your cervix (the opening to your uterus/womb from your vagina).

10. *I'm a trans man. I haven't had gender confirming surgery, do I need to have screening?*

If you're a trans man who has a cervix, then you should have routine cervical screening to help prevent cervical cancer. Our clinics are inclusive, and we welcome anyone who needs cervical screening to attend for an appointment.

11. Does HPV cause cervical cancer?

Yes, almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by high-risk types of HPV.

12. What are the symptoms of cervical cancer?

Cervical cancer often has no signs or symptoms, but symptoms may include bleeding after sex or between periods, pain in your pelvis or pain during sex.

13. How common is cervical cancer in Ireland?

Every year in Ireland approximately 300 people are diagnosed with cervical cancer, with over 90 lives lost to the disease.

14. How can I protect myself from cervical cancer?

If you are a woman or a person with a cervix aged 25 to 65 you can have routine screening for high-risk HPV through CervicalCheck, the National Cervical Screening Programme. It is not a test for cervical cancer but it's a test that is used to help identify people who might need treatment to prevent cancer from developing.

15. What happens during cervical screening?

During cervical screening, a small sample of cells is taken from your cervix and tested for HPV. If you've had a smear test before, then you'll find that the new test is exactly the same. During the test a small brush is used to collect a sample of cells from your cervix.

16. Does the HPV screening test hurt?

Testing can feel slightly uncomfortable or embarrassing, but for most people it's not painful.

17. I'm really embarrassed to have the test done

There's no need to feel embarrassed. We're here to make your experience as comfortable as possible. When you're booking an appointment, please let us know if you need any additional supports.

18. Do I need to shave before having the test done?

There's no need to shave/wax/epilate your public area before coming to the clinic.

19. How long will the test take?

The test only takes a few minutes, but the doctor or nurse will need to have a quick chat with you before performing the test. This shouldn't take too long, and we try to have you in and out in less than 30 minutes.

20. Why did testing change in Ireland?

The new HPV cervical screening is a better predictor of your risk of developing cervical cancer and is more reliable than a smear test. HPV testing picks up 15% more women with abnormalities than the previous test did. The screening test looks for HPV first because your risk of developing cervical cancer is very low if you do not have HPV.

21. How often should I have screening?

If you're 25 to 29 years old you'll be offered screening every 3 years, if you're 30 to 65 years old then you can have testing through CervicalCheck every 5 years.



22. I had the vaccine, do I need screening?

The HPV vaccine that is now given to post-primary students protects against the types of HPV that cause 9 out of 10 cervical cancers. The previous vaccine protected against the HPV types that cause 7 out of 10 cervical cancers. There's still a small risk that you could contract HPV, so it's important that you protect your health through routine cervical screening.

23. What happens if I receive a positive HPV result?

If HPV is found in your sample, then it will be tested for abnormal cells. If there are no abnormal cells, you will be offered a free repeat test in a year. If abnormal cells are present, you will be referred to a specialist clinic to see if you need any treatment to prevent cancer developing in the future.

24. I'm really worried that I might have HPV

If you're worried that you may have HPV and qualify for the CervicalCheck programme, then please make an appointment for cervical screening. If HPV is found in your sample, then it will be tested for abnormal cells. If there are no abnormal cells, you will be offered a free repeat test in a year. If abnormal cells are present, you will be referred to a specialist clinic to see if you need any treatment to prevent cancer developing in the future.

25. How can I sign up for screening?

There are two options: you can register for HPV cervical screening by visiting www.hse.ie/cervicalcheck, by calling Freephone 1800 45 45 55 or contacting info@cervicalcheck.ie; or if you're 25 or over, and have not attended screening before, you can register for routine cervical screening at your first appointment. If you need information about services in your area, visit the CervicalCheck website for information. The IFPA is registered with CervicalCheck and we'd be happy to welcome you to one of our clinics for your free screening.

26. Please help, I've been experiencing symptoms of cervical cancer!

Never ignore symptoms! Symptoms of cervical cancer include bleeding after sex or between periods, pain in your pelvis or pain during sex. If you are experiencing these symptoms, please contact one of our clinics to speak to a doctor.

