

STIEF 

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# HPV and throat cancer



## What is HPV?

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- Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a sexually transmitted infection that can infect the throat, genitals and anus.
- There are many types of HPV. Some strains of HPV can cause warts and cancer.
- HPV is very common. Without vaccination, 80% of adults will acquire some type of genital or oral HPV infection at some point in their life.
- Some people, many years after acquiring oral HPV, may develop throat cancer as a result of the HPV infection. Medically, this is referred to as HPV-related throat cancer.

## What causes throat cancer?

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- Studies in New Zealand and overseas show that HPV now causes most throat cancers.
- Smoking and alcohol can also cause throat cancer.

## How did I get an oral HPV infection?

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- HPV is transmitted to your mouth by oral sex. It may also be possible to get oral HPV infections in other ways.
- Increased numbers of oral sex partners increase the chances of oral HPV infection. However, as noted above, HPV is very common and can be acquired from having just one sexual partner.
- Having an oral HPV infection does not mean your partner was/is unfaithful.

## Who has oral HPV infection?

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- Genital HPV is very common. Anyone who gives oral sex may be exposed to oral HPV during their life.
- Four out of five people will have some kind of HPV infection somewhere in their body at some point in their lives.
- A study undertaken in the US estimated that around 10% of men and 3.6% of women have HPV in their mouths at any given time.
- Most people clear the infection on their own within a year or two, but in some cases HPV infection persists.

## Can I transmit oral HPV to others?

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### Family and friends

- Oral HPV is not casually transmitted by sharing drinks or kissing on the cheeks.
- It is currently unknown whether open-mouth kissing can transmit HPV.

### Partners

- If one partner has HPV then the other partner is likely to have been exposed to the infection.

- You do not need to change your intimate sexual contact.
- Female partners should ensure they have regular cervical screening.

## New sexual partners in the future

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- Many people with HPV-related throat cancer have no HPV detectable in their mouth after treatment.
- Discuss protection methods (e.g. condoms, dental dams or barrier protection) to practice safer sex with new partners.

## How long does it take for throat cancer to develop after HPV infection?

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- It may take many years to develop throat cancer after oral HPV infection. Therefore, it is not possible to know when and from whom the infection was acquired.
- HPV is common and the great majority of people who acquire it will clear the infection.
- Most patients with throat cancer no longer have detectable HPV in their mouth and are not capable of transmitting the infection. In cases where oral HPV remains detectable after treatment, it is unlikely to be infectious.

## Will HPV vaccination help me?

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- The HPV vaccine offers the best protection against HPV if given before becoming sexually active.
- For people who are already sexually active, the vaccine may still be of benefit as it will prevent the acquisition of new HPV infections for the strains covered by the vaccine.
- The vaccine will not help clear an infection you already have.
- The HPV vaccine (Gardasil 9) is licensed for use in New Zealand for anyone aged 9-45 years. The vaccine is free for everyone aged 9-26 years (inclusive). Ask your health care provider for further information or to get the vaccine (see *HPV Vaccination* pamphlet on [hpv.org.nz](http://hpv.org.nz)).

## Will my partner also get throat cancer?

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- The risk of HPV-related throat cancer may be slightly higher among partners of people with HPV-related throat cancer, but this cancer remains extremely rare among partners.
- Unlike cervical screening, there is currently no effective screening test for HPV-related throat cancer.

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## Where can I get further information?

- New Zealand HPV Project website [hpv.org.nz](https://hpv.org.nz)
- New Zealand HPV Project Helpline Toll free **0508 11 12 13**
- Your primary health provider, Sexual Wellbeing Aotearoa clinic or sexual health clinic

### Sexually Transmitted Infections Education Foundation

Copies of this pamphlet are available from:

**STIEF**, PO Box 2437, Shortland Street,  
Auckland 1140, New Zealand

[info@stief.org.nz](mailto:info@stief.org.nz)  
[stief.org.nz](https://stief.org.nz)

**The New Zealand HPV Project**

[hpv.org.nz](https://hpv.org.nz)

Helpline toll free: **0508 11 12 13**

Phone: **09 433 6526**



**View our sexual health website for rangatahi, including a national database of sexual health providers:**

[justthefacts.co.nz](https://justthefacts.co.nz)

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