

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ON HPV (HUMAN PAPILOMAVIRUS)

CERVICAL CANCER SCREENING

Health PEI is aligning with the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer goal of the elimination of cervical cancer by 2040 and is conducting a pilot program to initiate primary HPV testing for cervical cancer. Primary HPV testing means the HPV test will be the initial test used when screening for cervical cancer. The test looks for the presence of HPV, human papillomavirus, including any high-risk types responsible for almost all cervical cancers.

WHAT IS HPV?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a highly contagious virus and one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STI's) in Canada and around the world. It can be thought of as the common cold of STIs. About 80% of unvaccinated Canadians will have at least one HPV infection at some point in their life. There are more than 100 known types of HPV, with at least 14 that have been linked to cervical cancer.

There are two groups of HPV, low-risk and high-risk:

Low risk types of HPV do not cause cancer and are not associated with medical risks. Some low-risk types can cause warts that may be considered a “nuisance” or a cosmetic concern to those that have them.

High-risk types of HPV may lead to cervical cancer if left undetected and untreated. HPV types 16 and 18 are known to cause over 70% of cervical cancers.

Although about 90% of HPV infections will clear on their own within two years, some can lead to slow and progressive changes to the cervix that can result in the development of cancer. These progressive changes typically take 10-15 years or more to occur.

Almost all cervical cancers are caused by HPV. By testing for HPV and identifying abnormalities early, abnormal cell changes can be treated, and cervical cancer can be prevented.

HOW DO I GET HPV?

HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity, which includes intimate touching (penetration is not required), and oral, vaginal and anal sex. HPV can be found early, or years after you get it. This makes it very hard to know when and where you got it. Having a positive HPV test does not equal disease, it means you have tested positive for the virus. Having the virus is very common in young people and it will most often go away on its own without treatment.

HOW DO I TREAT HPV?

There are treatments for the cell changes that the virus causes, but no cure for the virus itself. Depending on your cervical cancer screening results, you may require an additional screen in 12 months to reassess your status. If follow-up is required you may be referred for colposcopy to have a closer look at your cervix to see if treatment is necessary. It is important to follow your health care provider recommendations to monitor your HPV status. The majority of healthy individuals will clear HPV on their own, in time. It is important to remember it is still possible to get another HPV infection in the future.

HOW DO I PROTECT MYSELF FROM HPV?

The HPV vaccine is the best way to protect yourself. The vaccine is 99% effective in preventing certain types of HPV. You can get vaccinated if you are already sexually active or have already had an HPV infection because you likely have not been exposed to all types of HPV that the vaccination offers protection against. You can further reduce your risk by limiting your sexual partners, using condoms and not smoking.

WHAT IS A PAP TEST (also known as cervical cancer screening)?

A Pap test is a procedure that removes a small sample of cells from the cervix. These cells are examined under a microscope and monitored for any abnormal changes. Pap tests make sure these changes are not missed and cervical cancer does not develop. Pap testing is done by a physician, a nurse practitioner, or a registered nurse.

WHAT IS A HPV TEST?

The procedure for HPV testing is similar to a Pap test. It requires a swab to collect cells from your cervix for testing. Currently this is done by a health care provider. HPV can also be tested using a swab from your vagina, that you can collect on your own. PEI is currently in the planning stages of initiating this self-sampling option. A negative HPV test means there is a 99% chance of not developing cervical cancer in five years, so screening will be less often.

WHO SHOULD HAVE A HPV TEST? (Current guidelines for [HPV screening pilot only](#))

- Any person with a cervix, who has ever had sexual skin-to-skin contact, starting at the age of 25
- HPV testing should be done every 5 years until the age of 65
- HPV testing can be stopped after the age of 65, if you have had an adequate negative screening history in the previous 10 years
- If you have had a hysterectomy, talk to your health care provider to see if you still need a HPV test
- Even if you are vaccinated against HPV, you should still get regular HPV testing

WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE MY RISK OF CERVICAL CANCER?

- Go for regular HPV/Pap testing
- Go for follow-up testing if your HPV/Pap result is abnormal
- Consider HPV immunization (talk to your health care provider for support with this decision)

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I HAVE A HPV TEST?

You should have a HPV test every 5 years.

If you have a positive HPV result, your health care provider will advise you when you need follow-up testing.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A HPV TEST?

Most HPV results will be negative, and therefore recommend repeat HPV testing in 5 years.

If you have a positive HPV result, it does not mean you have cancer. You will receive your results from a phone call or via mail and/or email, informing you of the next steps. This may include a repeat HPV test, a Pap test or a referral for colposcopy.

WHAT IS COLPOSCOPY?

A colposcopy procedure is usually done by a gynecologist, who looks at your cervix with a microscope. You will lie down, as you would for a Pap test. The specialist may take a very small piece of tissue (biopsy) and send it to the laboratory for testing. There are several treatments available, depending on the abnormality seen. Your health care provider will advise you on the best treatment option for you.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HPV SCREENING CONTACT:

Health PEI Cervical Cancer Screening Service **1-888-561-2233** or contact **colcancerscreening@ihis.org**

To book an appointment for HPV vaccinations, contact your local Public Health Nursing office:

<https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/health-pei/public-health-nursing>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada

<https://www.hpvinfos.ca/>

BC Centre for Disease Control

<https://smartsexresource.com/sexually-transmitted-infections/stis-conditions/human-papillomavirus-hpv/>

Government of Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/human-papillomavirus-hpv.html>

Canadian Cancer Society

<https://cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/reduce-your-risk/get-vaccinated/human-papillomavirus-hpv>

National Institutes of Health

<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/infectious-agents/hpv-and-cancer#q7>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/hpv/basic_info/index.htm