



York and Scarborough  
Teaching Hospitals  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Oropharyngeal Cancer

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

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# **What is The Human Papillomavirus?**

Human papillomaviruses (HPVs) can affect the skin and the moist membranes that line parts of the body, including the lining of the mouth and throat.

There are more than 100 different types, or strains, of this virus. The high risk HPVs (especially type 16) have been linked to the cancers affecting the oropharynx (which includes the tonsils and the base or back of the tongue).

## **How common is HPV?**

HPV is very common. Most people will acquire the virus at some time in their lives. For most people it causes no symptoms and goes away on its own. Only a very small proportion of HPV infections go on to cause cancer.

## **How do you get HPV?**

The types of HPV that affect the mouth and throat can be passed on through normal sexual activities.

It is possible to have the virus for many years and not have any signs of it - there is no way of knowing how long you have had the virus - it could be weeks, months or years. HPV infections may be acquired many years before a cancer develops. Therefore, a diagnosis of an HPV related cancer does not suggest promiscuity or infidelity on the part of you or your partner.

## **How does HPV cause cancer?**

Some types of HPV can cause changes in the cells of the lining of the mouth and throat. They are known as high risk HPVs. Doctors call the changes in these cells dysplasia. The changed cells have an increased risk of becoming cancerous.

## **Is there an increased risk of getting another HPV related cancer?**

Risk of developing another human papillomavirus related cancer is low.

## **Is my partner or family at risk?**

We do not know answers to all of these questions but, the evidence suggests that long-term partners do not seem to be at increased risk of HPV related cancers. However, it makes good sense for females to continue with routine cervical screening.

## **Can a vaccine help?**

Vaccines can prevent oral HPV infection but will not help when treating an established cancer.

Long term partners of patients will probably have already been exposed to HPV so will not benefit from vaccinations.

## **Will my HPV status affect my prognosis?**

Your personal HPV status is relevant if you have a head & neck cancer, this is because being HPV positive is associated with a likely better outcome compared to those who are HPV negative.

For reasons that are not yet fully understood, patients who have HPV related cancers respond better to treatment and as a result have a better prognosis, although this can be affected by other factors such as smoking.

If you have any questions or concerns please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

## **Tell us what you think of this leaflet**

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact:

The head & neck nursing team, The York Hospital,  
Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE or telephone  
01904 726063.

## **Teaching, training and research**

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

## **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email [pals@york.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@york.nhs.uk).

An answer phone is available out of hours.

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