



Throat Cancer & HPV



What is HPV?

If you've been diagnosed with throat cancer linked to the HPV virus, you probably want to know what the virus is, how you got it and whether you could pass it on.

HPV is the short name for the *human papillomavirus*.

This extremely common virus affects most people during their lifetime. It will only lead to cancer in some people – and we don't yet know why.

HPV-related throat cancers tend to respond better to treatment. This may provide a better outlook than for throat cancers caused by other factors, such as smoking and drinking alcohol.

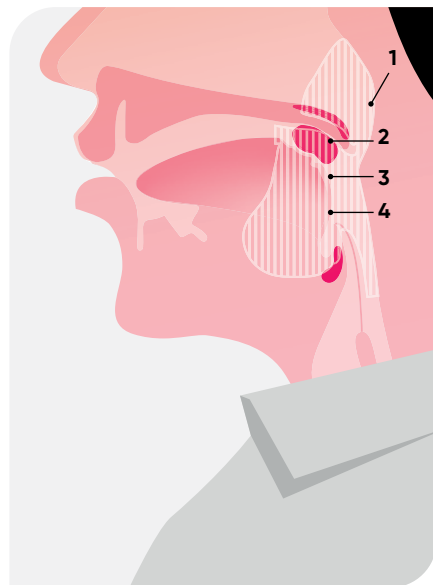
Remember most people get the HPV virus at some point and don't even know it. There's nothing you could have done to stop HPV causing cancer and you don't need to change your behaviour now.

Throat cancer

In this leaflet we'll use the term throat cancer to refer to the different cancers that affect the areas of the mouth and throat shown in the diagram. Their medical name is oropharyngeal (or-o-far-an-gee-al) cancer.

1. BACK WALL OF THROAT
2. SOFT PALATE
3. TONSILS
4. BACK OF TONGUE

 AREAS WHERE THROAT CANCER CAN OCCUR



HPV is a very common virus

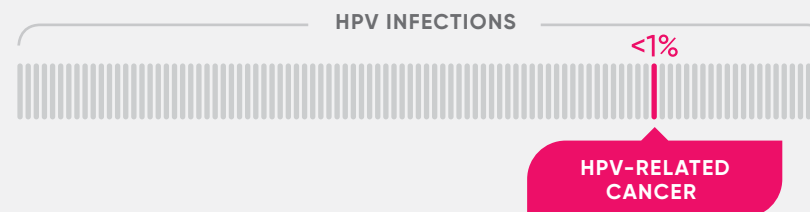
HPV is a family of common viruses that live on the skin and the moist areas of the body, such as:

- **mouth & throat**
- **male genitals** (penis, testicles)
- **female genitals** (vulva, vagina and cervix)
- **anus and rectum**

Most types of HPV do not cause cancer, but a few can. In 2006 a vaccine to stop the most common cancer-causing HPV types was developed. We expect this will prevent HPV cancers in the future. Most throat cancers caused by HPV come from HPV type 16.



Fewer than 1% result in HPV-related cancer



There are many types of HPV and each type has its own number. Some HPV types don't cause serious problems – these are called 'low risk' types. Others are 'high risk' types and can cause cancer.

What types of HPV can cause cancer?

Low risk HPV types

Can cause:

- **Skin warts on your hands**
- **Plantar warts on the soles of your feet**
- **Genital warts in your genital area and around the anus**

Does not cause cancer

High risk HPV types

- HPV-16 and HPV-18 are the two most common high HPV risk types
- These types have no obvious signs or symptoms unless they turn into cancer

Can cause:

- **HPV-related cancers, including throat cancer**
- **Nearly all cases of cervical cancer**

How can HPV be passed on?

Having HPV is a result of sexual activity. Eight out of ten sexually active people will catch an HPV virus that could cause cancer at some point in their lives.

These types of HPV infection have no obvious symptoms. So it's possible you could have had it for many years without knowing.

It's likely you got HPV at least ten years before you were diagnosed with cancer

The virus is passed through skin-to-skin genital, oral and anal contact, during sexual activity.

You can get HPV from just one sexual partner, but the risk of getting HPV goes up with the number of partners a person has.

Is my partner at risk of getting HPV?



Sometimes people worry that they'll pass on HPV to their loved ones, and therefore give them cancer.

If you and your partner have been together for a while you will probably have passed the HPV between you already. HPV infections are very common but HPV-related cancers are rare. So the chance of your partner getting this type of cancer is very low.

HPV is passed through skin-to-skin contact. So we know if you have a new partner, using condoms for vaginal, anal and oral sex can reduce the risk.

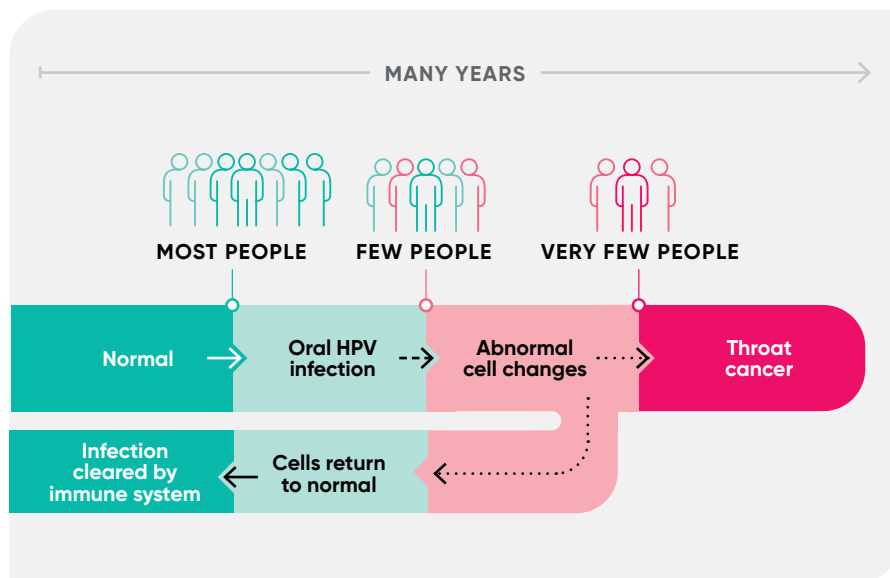


How did my HPV infection turn into cancer?



For most people who get HPV it goes away on its own without causing problems. But in a few cases, this doesn't happen. We don't yet know why the virus stays in some people, but we know it is more likely to stay if you smoke.

When the infection stays in the body it sometimes causes cells to change and become abnormal. Over time these abnormal cells can turn into cancer. Of the people who get oral HPV, only a small number go on to develop abnormal cells and an even smaller number go on to develop cancer. In most people, HPV goes away on its own and cells return to normal without any treatment.



Do I still have HPV?

At this stage, we don't know. When you have HPV, three things can happen:

- HPV goes away
- HPV hides from the test but stays in the body
- HPV stays in the body and can be found with a test

At the moment, we don't have a reliable test for test for oral HPV. This is why we can't screen for it. It is important to remember that even if oral HPV is found, there is no treatment available for the infection. Scientists continue to work on this important area of research.

What about the HPV vaccine?

In Australia, girls and boys aged 12 to 13 are offered the HPV vaccine through a free school-based program. Girls and boys are vaccinated at this age as this is when they will have the best immune response to the vaccine. For girls this is to protect them from cervical, anal and throat cancer caused by HPV and for boys to protect them from anal, penile and throat cancer caused by HPV.

In New Zealand, the HPV vaccine is free for everyone (males and females) aged 9 to 26 through schools, family doctors, local health centres and some Family Planning clinics.

We don't know for certain whether the vaccine prevents throat cancer caused by HPV – researchers are still working on this. We recommend discussing this with your GP.

We do know the vaccine won't help if you currently have an HPV infection. But it will help prevent future infections, or infections with different HPV types.

To find out more visit

Cancer Council (Australia):
<https://bit.ly/3fPtltl>

Ministry of Health (New Zealand):
<https://bit.ly/2WUD20E>



Will I get another cancer from HPV?

Throat cancers caused by HPV respond well to treatment and your chance of making a full recovery is much higher than with similar, smoking or alcohol-related throat cancers.

People sometimes worry they'll get another cancer caused by HPV. This is unlikely because the chance of an HPV infection leading to cancer is low.

To find out more about reducing your risk of cancer visit

Cancer Council Australia:

<https://bit.ly/35VyDPp>



You can help yourself stay healthy by not smoking and limiting the amount of alcohol you drink (the government recommends drinking no more than 2 standard drinks per day)



You should also visit your dentist regularly to check your mouth is healthy and go for your hospital follow-up appointments.



Things to remember about HPV

- **Having HPV is a result of sexual activity..** Most sexually active people will get it at some point in their lives.
- **It's rare for an HPV infection to turn into cancer.** We don't yet know why some people get cancer and others do not.
- **It's likely you got HPV at least ten years before you were diagnosed with cancer.**
- **Having HPV does not mean that you or your partner has been unfaithful.**
- **HPV-related throat cancers respond better to treatment** than throat cancers caused by smoking and drinking alcohol.



Find out more

These websites have more information you might find useful.

Head & Neck Cancer Australia - Learn more about HPV:

<https://www.headandneckcancer.org.au/head-and-neck-cancer-types/learn-more-about-hpv>

Head & Neck Cancer Australia - Oropharyngeal Cancer Introduction:

<https://www.headandneckcancer.org.au/head-and-neck-cancer-types/oropharyngeal-cancer-tonsil-cancer>

Cancer Council – Head and Neck

<https://bit.ly/35UMBRj>

Cancer Council - Understanding Head and Neck Cancers:

<https://bit.ly/3bqNylH>

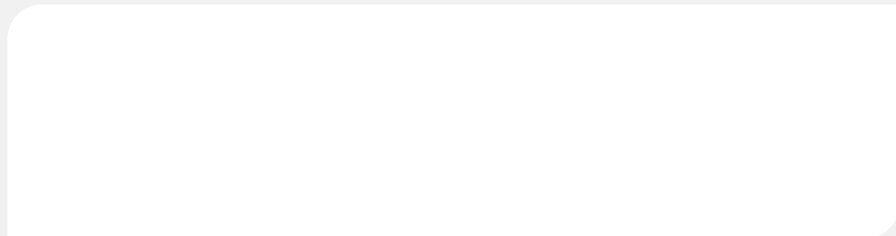
Julie McCrossin Podcast - The Thing about Advanced Cancer

<https://www.cancercouncil.com.au/advanced-cancer-podcasts/>

Julie McCrossin Video Series - Head & Neck Cancer

<https://headneckcancerforum.com/2021-videos/>

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Notes:



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