

HPV-Positive Oropharyngeal Cancer

Common questions & answers about HPV-positive oropharyngeal squamous cell cancer (HPV-OSCC)

A fact sheet for patients with HPV-positive oropharyngeal cancer and their families.

Additional Information

A comprehensive list of references is available in:
Fakhry C. and D'Souza G. Discussing the diagnosis of HPV-OSCC: Common Questions and Answers.
Oral Oncology. 2013

Reprinted with permission from Fakhry C, D'Souza G. Discussing the diagnosis of HPV-OSCC: Common Questions and Answers, *Oral Oncol* (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.oraloncology.2013.06.002>



What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?

- HPV is a sexually transmitted infection that can infect the oropharynx (tonsils and back of throat), anus, and genitals.
- There are many types of HPV. HPV can cause cancer, warts or have no effect.
- HPV is very common in the U.S. and Canada. Over two million Canadians have some type of genital or oral HPV infection.
- In some people, oral HPV infection leads to HPV-OSCC after many years.

What causes oropharyngeal cancer?

- HPV now causes most oropharyngeal cancers in the U.S. and Canada.
- It is recommended that oropharyngeal tumors be tested for HPV.
- Smoking and alcohol use can also cause oropharyngeal cancer.

How did I get an oral HPV infection?

- HPV is transmitted to your mouth by oral sex. It may also be possible to get oral HPV by other ways.
- Performing oral sex and having many oral sex partners can increase your chances of oral HPV infection.
- Having an oral HPV infection does not mean your partner was/is unfaithful and does not suggest promiscuity.
- Many people with HPV-OSCC have only had a few oral sex partners in their life.

Who has oral HPV infection?

- Many people will likely be exposed to oral HPV in their life.
- Around 10% of men and 3.6% of women in the U.S. and Canada have HPV in their mouths and HPV infection is more commonly found with older age.
- Most people clear the infections on their own within a year or two, but in some people HPV infection persists.

Can I transmit oral HPV infection to others?

Family and Friends:

- Oral HPV is not casually transmitted by sharing drinks or kissing on the cheek.
- We do not know if open mouth kissing can transmit HPV.

Partners of people with HPV-OSCC:

- You have already likely shared whatever infections you have.
- You do not need to change your sexual behaviour.
- Female partners should have regular cervical Pap screening.

New sexual partners in the future:

- Many patients with HPV-OSCC no longer have HPV detectable in their mouth after treatment, while others do.
- With new partners, discuss protection methods (e.g. condoms and barrier protection).

When did I get this infection?

- We do not know the time from first oral HPV infection to cancer but it takes many years.
- We know that some people have infection 15 years or more before cancer.

What does having HPV in my tumor mean?

- Oropharyngeal cancer patients with HPV in their tumor live longer, on average, than people without HPV (i.e. HPV-positive tumors usually respond well to therapy).
- However, patients who currently smoke tobacco or have smoked for a long time in the past do not live as long as patients who never smoked. Patients who are current smokers should consider quitting.

Will the HPV vaccine help me?

- The HPV vaccine prevents people from getting new HPV infections.
- The vaccine will not help you clear an infection you already have.
- The vaccine is recommended for people ages nine to 26 years old.

Will my spouse/partner also get HPV-OSCC?

- The risk of HPV-OSCC may be slightly higher among spouses of HPV-OSCC but this cancer remains rare among spouses.
- There are no recommended screening tests for HPV-OSCC.