

---

# HPV AND CANCER

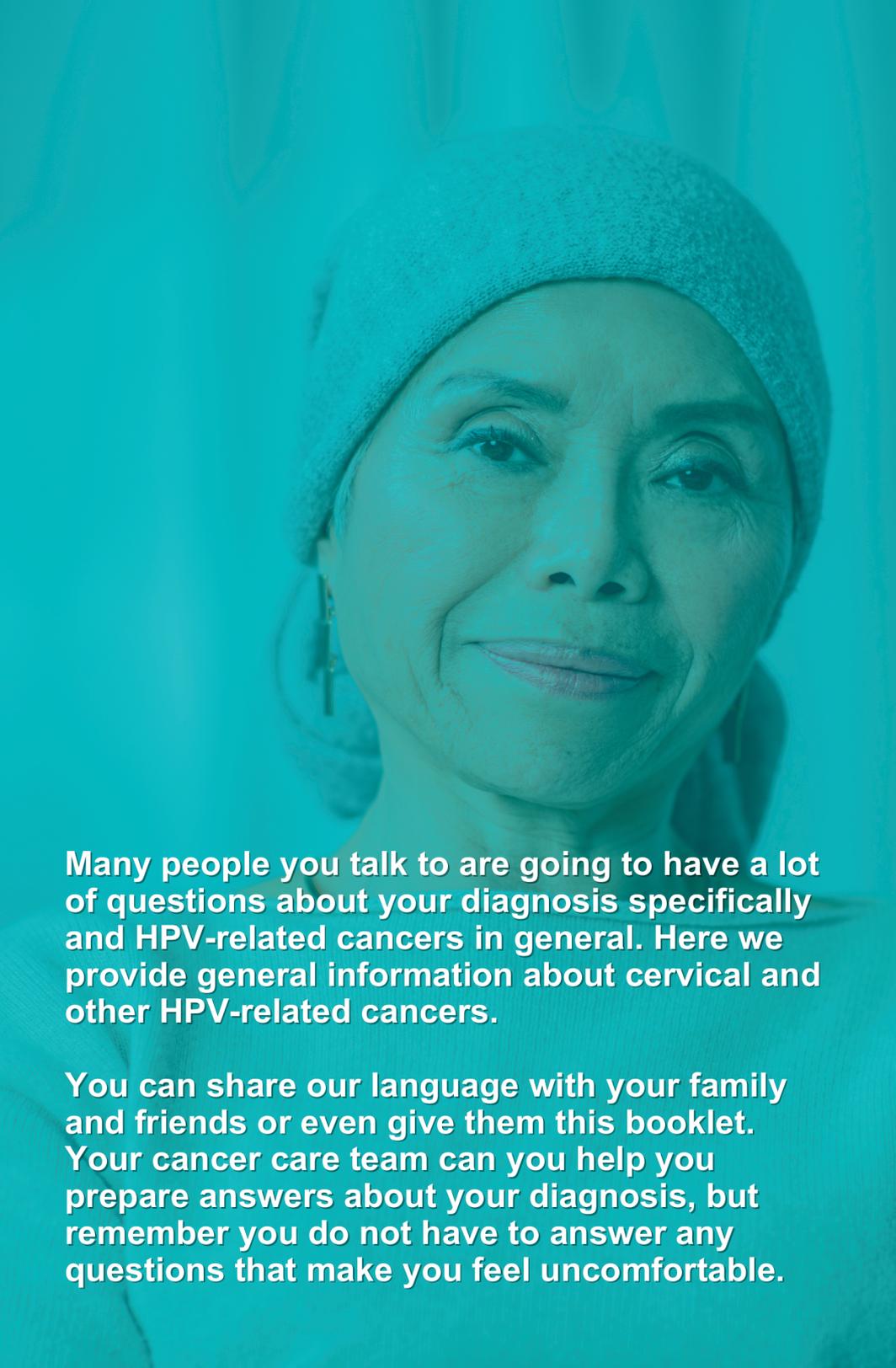
---



---

Information  
to share with  
family and  
friends

---



**Many people you talk to are going to have a lot of questions about your diagnosis specifically and HPV-related cancers in general. Here we provide general information about cervical and other HPV-related cancers.**

**You can share our language with your family and friends or even give them this booklet. Your cancer care team can help you prepare answers about your diagnosis, but remember you do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.**

# HPV Basics

## What is HPV?

There are over 100 different types of **human papillomavirus, or HPV**, some of which can be sexually transmitted. Some types of HPV can cause genital warts. Other types can cause cancer, including cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, or back of the throat. But while HPV can cause disease, most HPV infections don't cause noticeable symptoms. Most people will never know they have the virus.

## How common is HPV?

HPV is so common that nearly all people will get it at some point in their lives. About 79 million people are thought to have an active HPV infection at any given time.

## How is HPV spread?

Sexually transmitted HPV is spread by direct, skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who has an infection. Anyone who has ever had a sexual encounter can get HPV.

A person can get HPV from a partner at one time in their life and the virus will stay dormant (or "asleep") for a long time. Later, HPV can then be unknowingly passed on to another sexual partner, including a spouse.

## Is HPV dangerous?

There are types of HPV linked to cancer, like cancers of the genitals, anus, and the back of the throat. **Cervical cancer** is the first cancer in women found to be caused almost exclusively by a virus.

But an HPV infection doesn't mean a person will get cancer. In most cases, the virus is harmless and causes no symptoms. The body can clear the HPV infection naturally. But if HPV sticks around, it can lead to cancer. This is why screening is important. It helps find problems before they turn into cancer.

# HPV Prevention

## How can you prevent HPV?

There is an **HPV vaccine** that can prevent cervical, anal, vulvar, and vaginal cancers and pre-cancers. The vaccine protects against seven types of HPV that are linked to cancer. It also protects against two types linked with genital warts.

Condoms can also help prevent HPV. However, since HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact, condoms can reduce—but not eliminate—the possibility of passing on HPV.

## Is the vaccine effective?

**Yes.** Rates of infection with the types of HPV covered by the vaccine have dropped significantly since it was introduced. The HPV types that cause most HPV cancers and genital warts have dropped 86 percent among teen girls (the first group to be vaccinated). It's estimated that 90% of HPV-related cancers could be prevented with vaccination.

## Is the vaccine safe?

**Yes.** Over 120 million doses of the HPV vaccine have been distributed and it has proven to be safe and well tolerated. The most common side effect of the vaccine is pain, redness, and swelling around where the shot was given. Other mild reactions reported include fever, headache, fatigue, nausea, and vomiting. Some people have experienced fainting as well.

As with any vaccine or medication, there is the possibility of more serious issues, such as an allergic reaction. But these reactions are rare. The HPV vaccine also continues to be monitored for any safety concerns.

## Who Should Get the Vaccine?

HPV vaccination is part of routine recommended vaccinations for girls and boys ages 11-12, but it can be given as early as age 9. Research shows that the vaccine produces a stronger immune re-

sponse when given during the preteen years, and fewer shots (only two) are required. Also, the vaccine is designed to prevent infection with HPV, so vaccination is recommended at a young age—before kids are exposed to the virus.

The vaccine can be given to older teens and adults and is recommended up to age 26. Anyone starting the shots after age 15 will likely need three doses.

### **Do HPV vaccines encourage sexual behavior?**

**No.** While some parents have expressed a concern that vaccinating their children against HPV will lead to increased sexual behavior, many studies have shown this not to be the case.





Each year, there are about **37,300** cases of HPV-related cancer in the U.S.

11,100 cases of cervical cancer

14,800 cases of throat cancer

6,900 cases of anal cancer

2,900 cases of vulva cancer

900 cases of penile cancer

700 cases of vagina cancer

## **HPV and Cancer**

### **How common are HPV-related cancers?**

There are about 37,300 cases of cancer related to HPV each year in the United States. The CDC estimates that 90% of these cancers could be prevented with vaccination.

### **How do you screen for cervical cancer?**

Everyone who has a cervix should be screened for HPV and/or cervical cancer on a regular basis. An HPV test looks for the types of HPV linked to cancer. This test is often done at the same time as a Pap test. A Pap test looks at cervical cells for cancers or pre-cancerous changes. Both tests involve inserting a swab into your vagina to collect cells from the cervix.

Cervical cancer usually takes years or even decades to develop. If a Pap test finds changes to cervix, there are usually treatments that can prevent these changes from becoming cancer.

How often you have a screening test will depend on your age, the type of test, and what your results are. Ask your health care provider when you should be screened. Because cervical cancer can take so long to develop, people who are no longer sexually active still need to be screened.

## **How do you screen for anal cancer?**

There are no FDA-approved screening tests for HPV of the anus. Health care providers often ask questions to figure out if you have risk factors or symptoms. They may also do a visual exam and a digital rectal exam (inserting a gloved finger into the rectum) to look for warts and lesions.

If the health care provider finds something, they may use anal cytology (sometimes called an anal Pap test). This involves examining cells under a microscope to look for cancer or precancerous cell changes.

Routine screening for anal cancer is not recommended. However, anyone who has had HPV somewhere else in the body or has a history of receptive anal sex might want to ask their health care provider about anal screening.

## **Can you screen for HPV of the mouth?**

There are no screening tests for oral HPV that have been approved by the FDA. If your health care provider finds oral HPV lesions during an exam, they can biopsy them and test the tissue to see if it's cancerous or pre-cancerous. This kind of testing is only done when someone already has symptoms.

Thirty percent of oral cancers are related to HPV. It is commonly seen in people ages 20 to 39.

## **Can HPV-related cancers be treated and cured?**

Like with all cancer, what treatments are used and whether they can provide a cure depends on how soon the cancer is found and treated, as well as other individual factors. Treatments often include surgery, chemotherapy, and/or radiation.

Research has found that people with cervical, anal, and head and neck cancers caused by HPV are more easily cured with radiation and chemotherapy than people with tumors not caused by HPV.

---

# RESOURCES

---

For more information and additional resources (including videos and podcasts), please see the National Cervical Cancer Coalition's website.

**[www.nccc-online.org](http://www.nccc-online.org)**

