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Fact Sheet – Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

The ultimate cause of cervical cancer is persistent infection with high risk Human Papillomavirus (HR-HPV); a group of viruses found everywhere which infect both men and women. Although transmission is most common in those who are sexually active and HPV can be labelled as a sexually transmitted infection, cervical cancer is not a sexually transmitted disease.

Most frequently HPV is cleared by the immune system without the person ever knowing they have been infected, but the transformation zone of the cervix is fragile, prone to adverse effects (non physical or chemical abrasion) and the most likely area in which persistent infection can develop. If such persistent infection is left untreated, it can develop into abnormal cells and subsequently invasive cancer.

There are over 100 identified types of HPV and each different type has been assigned a specific number. HPV infects the skin and mucosa (any moist membrane, such as the lining of the mouth and throat, the cervix and the anus). Different types affect different parts of the body causing lesions. The majority of HPV types infect the skin on external areas of the body, for example 1 and 2 cause verucca's, 6 and 11 cause genital warts.

The strains which cause someone to develop warts are not the same group of HPV that can cause cancer. There are around 20 types that are thought to be associated with the development of cancer. The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the International Association of Research on Cancer (IARC) defines 13 of these 20 types as oncogenic (cancer causing). This means there is direct evidence that they are associated with the development of cervical cancer and are considered high-risk.

These high risk types of HPV are 16, 18, 31, 33, 35, 39, 45, 51, 52, 56, 58, 59 and 68. A person infected with a high risk HPV type will show no symptoms so they may never know they have it.

- Your first sexual experience puts you at risk of infection.
- You are still at risk of contracting HPV even if you do not have penetrative sex as the virus is transmitted though skin-to-skin contact.
- Infection with HPV does NOT imply either infidelity or promiscuity.
- If you get high-risk HPV you will not require treatment nor will your partner.
- A strong immune system can help your body to clear an HPV infection.
- Smoking makes it harder for the body to clear HPV.
- It can take 12-18 months to clear a high-risk HPV infection.
- An HPV infection can persist in the body for many years without causing any problems for many years.