

What is the human papillomavirus?

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is fairly common; it infects the skin or the mucous membrane. There are many different types of HPV, which can trigger different illnesses. Some types of HPV can cause pre-cancer or cancer if the infection persists for a long time.

How is it transmitted?

HPV is transmitted through vaginal, oral or anal intercourse, but transmission is also possible through hands, sex toys or other objects that are shared in the genital area by multiple people.

What are possible symptoms and consequences?

The majority of infections proceed without symptoms, and the body is able to fight them on its own.

Some types of HPV can cause wart-like changes to the skin. These occur inside the vagina or in the anus, among other places, and sometimes require a targeted medical examination to be detected. But sometimes they appear as cauliflower-type growths in the genital and anal regions.

High-risk types of HPV can lead to pre-cancer or cancer, such as on the cervix, vagina, labia, anus, penis or pharynx.

How is HPV tested for?

For early detection of cervical cancer, women are advised to regularly get examined for changes in the tissue as part of their gynaecological check-up. The cervical smear (aka Pap smear) that is necessary for this procedure has been established in Switzerland since the 1970s. In the case of normal findings, it is recommended every three years. The costs are covered by health insurance.

Since the vaccine covers the principal but not all types of cancer-causing HPV, regular Pap smears are recommended even after HPV vaccination.

How can the infection be prevented?

There is a vaccine against human papillomavirus. It protects against seven of the most common cancer-causing types of the virus (which are HPV-16, -18, -31, -33, -45, -52, -58) and against the types that are most responsible for genital warts (HPV-6 and -11). The Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) recommends HPV vaccination for adolescents and young adults. The ideal time frame is between ages 11 and 14, before the start of sexual activity. It can make sense up to the age of 26 as well. For 11- to 26-year-olds, the vaccination costs are covered by health insurance, provided the vaccine is administered as part of a cantonal programme. Your doctor can provide you with further information.

How is HPV treated?

An HPV infection cannot be treated. But the effects of the infection, such as growths in the genital and anal regions, can be surgically removed. There is no drug that can cure pre-cancer or cancer caused by HPV. But if detected early, a laser treatment or surgery may be able to treat the changes.

And for everyone having sex:

Because everybody likes it differently: do the personalised Safer Sex Check lovelife.ch.

For more information, go to: lovelife.ch

