

HPV & Oral Cancer

Frequently Asked Questions



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Are you at risk? Evidence supports a strong link between Human Papillomavirus (HPV) & increased oral cancer risk – which means it may be possible to get oral cancer from HPV. In fact, HPV is suspected of causing a surge in oral cancer rates in younger, non-smoking patients; whereas previously, oral cancer was seen mainly in older smokers & drinkers.¹

What is Human Papillomavirus (HPV)?^{2,3}

HPV are small DNA viruses capable of infecting the mucous membranes & skin of humans. HPV is the most commonly transmitted Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) in North America. HPV is generally symptomless, so most people are unaware they have it.

HPV is transmitted through direct sexual contact with mucous membranes, including the anogenital (anus, cervix, vagina, penis) & oropharyngeal regions (lips, tongue, gums, mouth, palate, tonsils & pharynx) of the body – **meaning HPV can be transmitted through oral, vaginal or anal sex.**

What is the link between HPV & oral cancer?^{4,5}

Recent studies show that HPV may be a risk factor for developing oral cancer. High-risk HPV types have the potential to target the oropharyngeal region of the body because it is a mucous membrane. This means that during unprotected oral sex with a partner infected with HPV, there is the potential for transmission of HPV through direct oral-genital contact.

HPV can increase your risk of oral cancer when in contact with mucosal tissues in the mouth, because it can cause mutations in those cells. Cellular mutations (changes in the way the cell looks and acts) can become precancerous if not treated early, and may advance to cancer.



Facts About HPV^{2,4}

- HPV is most prevalent in sexually active girls & young women between 15 & 19 years of age; however, any person who is sexually active can receive & transmit the virus
- There are more than 100 different types of identified HPV
- Nearly 100% of cervical cancer cases are caused by at least one type of HPV
- HPV-16 & HPV-18 together are two high-risk HPV types reported to cause up to 70% of cervical cancers
- Approximately 75% of the population will be infected with HPV at some point in their lives
- Some HPV types (HPV-6 & HPV-11) can cause warts to appear in the anogenital regions of the body

How can I prevent the risk of HPV-related oral cancer?^{6,7,8}

- **Practice safe sex:** Using condoms during sexual activity (including oral sex) may lower your risk of HPV transmission; however, condoms are not 100% effective
- **Limit sexual partners:** You can limit your risk of HPV infection by limiting the number of sexual partners you have in your lifetime
- **Get tested:** Schedule regular cervical cancer screenings with your physician; for women this means having regular PAP tests
- **Get the HPV vaccine:** The HPV vaccine helps protect against contracting high-risk HPV-16 & HPV-18 types
- **Schedule regular oral cancer checks with your dentist:** Health Canada recommends Canadians get checked for oral cancer on a regular basis during routine medical &/or dental examinations. Oral cancer screenings are quick, easy & painless – **and could save your life.**

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Sources

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