



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. It can cause cancer, warts or have no effect.
- HPV is very common in the U.S. More than 20 million Americans have some type of genital or oral HPV infection.
- In some people, oral HPV infection can lead to HPV-positive oropharyngeal squamous cell cancer (HPV-OSCC) after many years.

What causes oropharyngeal cancer?

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



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Questions and Answers About
HPV-Positive
Oropharyngeal
Squamous Cell Cancer
(HPV-OSCC)

How did I get an oral HPV infection?

- HPV is transmitted to your mouth by oral sex. It also may 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?

- Many people will likely be exposed to oral HPV in their life.
- Around 10 percent of men and 3.6 percent of women in the U.S. 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 the HPV infection persists in some people.

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 behavior.
- Female partners should have regular cervical Pap tests.

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 the infection for 15 years or more before it becomes 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; HPV-positive tumors usually respond well to therapy.

- 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 9 to 26.

Will my spouse/partner also get HPV-OSCC?

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

More 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.

