

## **Other HPV Infections That Can Lead to Cancer - Talking points**

### **General Information about HPV and Cancer**

#### **How common are HPV infections?**

According to the CDC, about 14 million people become newly infected with HPV each year. It is the most common sexually transmitted infection. Most sexually active men and women will have at least one type of HPV at some point during their lives.

#### **Are there different types of HPV?**

There are more than 100 different types of HPV. They are often referred to as “low-risk” (wart causing) or “high-risk” (cancer-causing) and can lead to various conditions in both men and women.

#### **What body sites can be affected by HPV and have the potential to develop into cancer from high-risk types?**

The sites affected by an HPV infection can include the cervix, vulva or vagina in women, the penis in men and the rectum, rectal opening and back of the throat in both men and women.

#### **How does an HPV infection develop into cancer?**

Although most HPV infections resolve spontaneously, a small proportion of infected persons are not able to clear the virus. When the body’s immune system cannot get rid of a high-risk HPV infection, it can linger over time and turn normal cells into abnormal cells and then cancer. About 10 percent of women with high-risk HPV infections on their cervix will develop long-lasting infections that put them at risk for cervical cancer. Similarly, when high-risk HPV strains linger and infect the cells of the vagina, penis, rectum, rectal opening or back of the throat, it can cause cell changes called pre-cancers. These may eventually develop into cancer if they are not found and removed in a timely manner. These cancers are much less common than cervical cancer.

### **Oral HPV**

#### **What is oral HPV?**

The same types of HPV that infect the genital areas can infect the mouth and throat. HPV found in the mouth and throat is called “oral HPV.” Some types of oral HPV (known as “high risk types”) can cause cancers of the head and neck area. Other types of oral HPV (known as “low risk types”) can cause warts in the mouth or throat. In most cases, HPV infections of all types go away before they cause any health problems.

#### **What head and neck cancers can be caused by HPV?**

HPV can cause cancers in the back of the throat, most commonly in the base of the tongue and tonsils, in an area known as the “oropharynx.” These cancers are called “oropharyngeal cancers.” HPV 16 and 18 are increasingly found in cancer of the oropharynx, those and 7 other cancer causing strains are found in the HPV 9 vaccine.

**How does HPV cause cancer?**

HPV can cause normal cells in infected skin to turn abnormal. Most of the time, you cannot see or feel these cell changes. In most cases, the body fights off the HPV infection naturally and infected cells then go back to normal. But in cases when the body does not fight off this virus, HPV can cause visible changes, and certain types of HPV can cause an oropharyngeal cancer. Cancer caused by HPV often takes years to develop. It is unclear if having HPV alone is sufficient to cause oropharyngeal cancers, or if other factors (such as smoking or chewing tobacco) interact with HPV to cause these cancers.

**What are the signs and symptoms of oropharyngeal cancer?**

Signs and symptoms may include persistent sore throat, earaches, hoarseness, enlarged lymph nodes, pain when swallowing, and unexplained weight loss. Some people have no signs or symptoms.

**How common is oral HPV?**

Studies in the U.S. have found that about 7 percent of people have oral HPV, but only 1 percent of people have the type of oral HPV that is found in oropharyngeal cancers (HPV type 16). Oral HPV is about three times more common in men than in women.

**How common are cancers of the oropharynx?**

Each year in the U.S., about 3,100 women and 12,638 men are diagnosed with HPV-associated oropharyngeal cancers.

**How do people get oral HPV?**

Only a few studies have looked at how people acquire oral HPV, and some of these studies have shown conflicting results. Some studies suggest that oral HPV may be passed on during oral sex (from mouth-to-genital or mouth-to-anus contact) or open-mouthed (“French”) kissing; others have not. The likelihood of getting HPV from kissing or having oral sex with someone who has HPV is not known. We do know that partners who have been together a long time tend to both may have genital HPV. More research is needed to understand exactly how people acquire and pass on oral HPV infections.

**How can I lower my risk of giving or getting oral HPV?**

At this time, no studies have explored how oral HPV infections can be prevented. However, it is likely that condoms and dental dams, when used consistently and correctly, will lower the chances of giving or getting oral HPV during oral sex, since they serve as barriers and can stop the transmission of HPV from person to person. More research is needed to understand how oral HPV is passed on, how it can be prevented, and who is most likely to develop health problems from an oral HPV infection.

**Is there a test for me to find out if I have oral HPV?**

There is no FDA-approved test to diagnose HPV in the mouth or throat. Medical and dental organizations do not recommend screening for oral HPV. More research is needed to find out if screening for oropharyngeal cancers will have health benefits. Talk to your dentist about any symptoms that could suggest early signs of oropharyngeal cancer.

*Information for this document obtained from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Talking points document developed by the North Dakota Cancer Coalition HPV Workgroup and the North Dakota Department of Health Oral Health Program*