



## HPV and Pap Tests for Trans Women

### What is HPV?

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI), infecting up to 75% of sexually active Canadians. There are over 100 different types of HPV, most of which are harmless and pass through the body without any symptoms. More than 40 types can affect the areas on or between the genitals and the anus. HPV poses a problem for trans women, as it causes an increase in the risk of anal and genital cancer.

HPV is transmitted through any kind of sexual activity that involves direct skin-to-skin contact with an infected area of the body. This includes vaginal, anal and oral sex, as well as fingering, fisting, rubbing, touching, scissoring, and sharing sex toys. HPV can be transmitted to any person who has ever had any sexual contact, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. This virus is non-discriminatory and has the potential to affect all sexually active individuals. *No matter what you may have heard, if you are a sexually active trans woman or have ever had any sort of sexual contact with another person, you can be infected with HPV.*

### What Are the Symptoms of HPV?

HPV often does not cause any symptoms, so you may contract the virus and spread it without even realizing that you have it. Even if it has been a few years since your last sexual activity, the virus can still be present in your body. Transmission of HPV usually occurs during an outbreak of symptoms, but can also occur even if symptoms are not present.

Low-risk types of HPV may cause warts which can form weeks, months, or years after sexual contact with an infected person and may grow in clusters on the anal and genital areas. These warts may cause itching, burning, and discomfort in the anal or genital areas; they may also grow in the mouth or throat of a person who has had oral sex with an infected person. Symptoms will usually occur within 1-8 months after exposure. High-risk types of HPV can cause cell changes and pre-cancerous lesions that may lead to anal or genital cancer, if left untreated.

### I Have HPV... Now What?

The immune system is generally able to fight off an HPV infection, meaning that the virus may pass

through the body naturally and go away by itself, with or without any sort of medical intervention. In 90% of cases, low-risk types of HPV work their way through the body without any symptoms within 18 months. In fact, you may never even realize that you have had the virus! If symptoms do occur, they are easily treatable, either by a medical procedure, in which warts are either burned or frozen off, or by topical cream. On average, the treatment of cervical, anal and genital warts takes approximately 8 months. Even when symptoms disappear, you may be infected with HPV again and may experience recurrences of symptoms in the future. People who are pregnant, as well as individuals with HIV, AIDS, and/or different types of cancer, may experience recurring symptoms due to a weakened immune system. *Please note that regular STI screening does not test for HPV.*

### **What Can I Do to Protect Myself?**

Any time that you have sexual contact with your partner(s), you run the risk of transmitting HPV, if either/any of you is/are infected. You will never be totally protected against HPV, even when you are using protection. Condoms do not offer 100% protection from HPV, since the virus lives on skin which is not covered by a condom. Proper and consistent use of the following safer sex practices will help to protect you from the virus as much as possible:

- Use a dental dam or a condom during oral and penetrative sex.
- Wash your hands with soap after touching your partner(s)'s genitals, and before touching your own, since HPV can be transmitted through touching and fisting without protection. Use latex gloves and water-based lubricant when touching or penetrating the genitals/anus.
- Use condoms on sex toys. Make sure that you and your partner(s) each have your own or sterilize them before sharing. Clean them well after every use.
- During an outbreak of HPV symptoms, abstain from having sexual contact with your partner(s) until symptoms have subsided. Be open and honest with your partner(s) if you are infected with HPV. Talk about safer sex methods with your partner(s).
- A vaccine is now available for the two most common types of HPV. Speak to your health professional for more information.

### **What If My Symptoms Persist?**

Some high-risk types of HPV do not easily go away and may develop into cervical, anal, or penile cancer. If you notice anything different in your genital or anal areas, please speak to your health professional about it.

### **I'm Pre-op or Not Planning on Having Bottom Surgery.... Should I Be Concerned?**

If you are a trans woman who has not had any bottom surgery, you do not have a cervix and therefore do not need to be concerned with cervical cancer or Pap tests. However, if you are sexually active, you need to be concerned with anal and penile cancers, which can also be caused by HPV. Keep an eye on your penis, scrotum, groin, and anus, and watch out for any lumps, sores or growths that do not go away. The symptoms of anal cancer may be bleeding, pain, itching, and/or discharge in the anus, swollen lymph nodes in the anal/groin area, and changes in bowel habits or in the shape of your stool. If you experience any redness or irritation in these areas, get them checked out by your health professional. You can get an anal Pap test in order to check for cell abnormalities.

An **anal Pap test** is a simple procedure in which your health care professional takes a swab of cells from your anus and has them examined in a lab. If abnormal cells are found, they can be removed or treated, decreasing the risk of cancer. Anal cancer is treatable, if detected early enough. Since there may not be

any noticeable symptoms until the cancer is quite advanced, the best way to make sure that you protect yourself is to get tested regularly, at least once every two or three years. If you have HIV, it is best to get tested once a year, since you are two to three times more likely to get anal cancer than individuals who do not have HIV.

### **Where Can I Get an Anal Pap Test?**

At this time, anal Pap tests are not routinely done in our province, meaning that not a lot of people request them. But it is very important to note that anal Pap tests *can be done at your doctor's office*. It is up to you to request an anal Pap test. It is a simple procedure in which your doctor uses a small moist cotton swab to collect a sample of cells from your anus, just a few centimeters from the opening, and sends the specimen to a lab for examination. The cytology lab analyzes the cells from the anal Pap test just as they would analyze cells from cervical Pap tests. The anal cells are screened for any structural abnormalities which may lead to the development of anal cancer. Depending on the results of the test, you may be referred onwards for a biopsy for further examination.

### **How Do I Prepare Myself for The Test?**

There are some things that you should avoid doing at least 24 hours before an anal Pap test. Refrain from having anal receptive intercourse, and avoid putting creams, lubricants, medications, sex toys or other objects into your anus. Remember that it is totally normal to feel a mix of feelings before an anal Pap test. Remind yourself that you are having the test in order to keep yourself healthy: it could save your life! If you are still feeling uneasy about the test, you may schedule an appointment with your doctor in order to discuss your concerns. Having an open dialogue with your doctor is the best way to ensure that your health needs are recognized and met. Ask your doctor if you may bring a friend with you for support. Practice deep breathing during the test, to loosen the muscles in your anus and to calm your mind.

### **I'm Post-op ... Should I Be Concerned?**

If you have already had bottom surgery in which a cervix and/or vaginal canal was created, it is a good idea to get a regular Pap test. Generally, a neocervix is created by using tissues from the penis and, since HPV can be transmitted through these tissues, it is important for you to get a Pap test. During this test, the doctor will take a sample of cells from your cervix, using a small brush, and send them to a cytology lab for examination. If abnormal cells are found, they can be treated or removed, decreasing your risk of cervical cancer.

If you had bottom surgery in which the cervix was not created, you do not need to be concerned with cervical cancer, nor do you need to get a Pap test. You should still be concerned with HPV, as this may lead to vaginal cancer. Talk to your health care provider about having a pelvic exam in order to detect any changes in the vaginal walls that could potentially lead to vaginal cancer.

In any case, it is very important that you be honest with your health care provider about your health history. Speak with them about your situation and create a dynamic dialogue with them, keeping your needs at the forefront. Remember, you have the right to protect and maintain your own health! You may make an appointment for a Pap test at Planned Parenthood where we offer a comfortable, confidential and safe environment with knowledgeable and helpful doctors, staff and volunteers.

# **Sexual Health Questions? We Have Answers!**

**Location:**

47 St. Clare Avenue, St. John's, NL, A1C 2J9

**Hours:**

Monday: 9am – 4:30pm

Tuesday: 9am – 4:30pm

Wednesday: 9am – 4:30pm

Thursday: 12pm – 6:00pm

Friday: 9am – 4:30pm

**Phone:**

579-1009

Toll Free: 1-877-NO MYTHS

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**Website:**

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