

### HPV information leaflet

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

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a common virus that 8 in 10 of us will get at some time during our lives.

There are over 200 different types of HPV. Around 40 types affect the genital area:

- Most do not cause any problems.
- Some cause skin conditions like genital warts.
- About 13 types are linked to cancer – these types are called high-risk HPV.

#### **How do people get HPV?**

HPV is usually passed on through skin-to-skin contact. For HPV that affects the genitals, this includes:

- Oral, anal or vaginal sex
- Touching in the genital area
- Sharing sex toys.

You can get HPV the first time you have sex. In fact, anyone who has ever had any type of sexual contact can get HPV. HPV does not have symptoms and there is no treatment. Try to remember it is common and, in 9 out of 10 people, the immune system gets rid of HPV within 2 years. Sometimes the immune system can't get rid of HPV, and it stays in the body. This is called a persistent infection.

### **HPV and cervical cancer**

Almost all cervical cancers (99.7%) are caused by high-risk HPV.

High-risk HPV can cause the cells of the cervix to change. We call these cell changes (abnormal cells).

Cell changes are not cancer but, if they progress, they may develop into cervical cancer.

As well as cervical cancer, high-risk HPV is linked to other cancers that affect men and women, including anal, vulval, vaginal, and some head and neck cancers.

### **Ways to reduce your risk**

You can't completely protect against HPV. But there are ways you can reduce your risk of getting HPV or developing a persistent infection that your immune system can't get rid of:

- Try to stop smoking. In the UK, smoking tobacco is linked to about 2 in 10 cervical cancers.

Smoking weakens your immune system, making it less able to get rid of HPV. If you want to quit, the NHS has programmes to support you.

- Have the HPV vaccine. If you are eligible, the HPV vaccine protects against high-risk HPV types that are linked to 7 in 10 cervical cancers.

- Try to have safer sex. Using condoms or dental dams help reduce your risk of getting HPV, but they do not completely protect against it. Condoms and dental dams only cover part of the genitals, but HPV lives on the skin in and around the whole genital area.