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CHU de Québec-Université Laval

Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal

Centre universitaire de santé McGill

CIUSSS de l'Estrie - Centre hospitalier  
universitaire de Sherbrooke

COMM 18\_058\_01A

# HPV Human Papilloma Virus & Oropharyngeal Cancer

## & Questions & Answers

May 2022



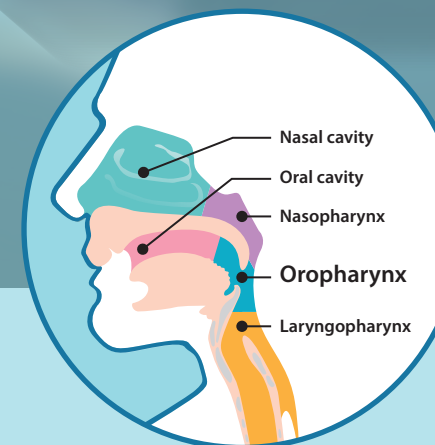
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d'otorhinolaryngologie et  
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The oropharynx is a part of what we usually call the throat. It includes the tongue base, the tonsils and the soft palate.

The three main risk factors for oropharyngeal cancer are **tobacco**, **heavy alcohol consumption** and infection to the **human papilloma virus** (HPV).

**HPV** is a virus with many different strains; some at high risk for causing cancer and others at low risk. The low risk HPV strains are associated with benign lesions like warts (anogenital or laryngeal) which we call condylomas or papillomas.



- **HPV is a virus that can infect mucosa of different body sites.**
- **The association between HPV and cervical cancer has been known for a while.**
- **More recently, a link between certain strains of HPV and oropharyngeal cancer, as well as anogenital cancer was found.**

#### How does an oropharyngeal HPV infection occur?

- HPV is the most frequent sexually transmitted disease. It is transferred to the oropharynx when a non-protected orogenital sexual relation occurs.
- Rare cases of French-kiss transmission have been reported.
- Oral sex is a frequent sexual practice. It is performed by 80% of the sexually active population.

I have an HPV positive oropharyngeal cancer. Am I contagious?

## HPV Human Papilloma Virus & Oropharyngeal Cancer

It is important to distinguish the different types of contact. With **family and friends**, casual contact and kissing on the cheek does not represent a risk. There is no need for precautions.

With **a long time partner**, since both of you have already been exposed to HPV upon previous sexual contact, there is no need to change your sexual habits or practices.

Studies demonstrate a potential slightly increased risk of developing an HPV-driven cancer among spouse of a partner with a cancer induced by HPV. Further studies are necessary to confirm this theory.

Female partners of a patient with HPV related oropharyngeal cancer should adhere to the cervical cancer screening program provided by the Government (Pap test) which is recommended for all women from 21 to 65 years old, who have been sexually active.

**With a new sexual partner** as it is very difficult or impossible to predict HPV contagiousness after treatment, it is important to talk about potential barrier prevention methods with the new partner (condom and dental dam).

### Since when am I infected with HPV?

HPV related oropharyngeal cancers are not necessarily related to a recent HPV infection. Exposure to the virus can date back several years. Clinical manifestations can occur several years after being infected. Eighty percent of the sexually active population get infected with HPV at one point. You have 8 in 10 chances of having been in contact with HPV. However, 90% of infected individuals spontaneously eliminate the virus.

### Is oropharyngeal cancer prognosis different whether it is caused by HPV versus tobacco and alcohol?

Cancers caused by HPV are different than those induced by smoking and drinking alcohol. In most case, prognosis is better than in oropharyngeal cancers caused by tobacco and alcohol. HPV induced cancers respond better to treatment.

Smoking and drinking cessation increases the likelihood of cure and decreases the risk of cancer recurrence, related or not to HPV.

### Is there a way to prevent HPV induced oropharyngeal cancer?

Yes, vaccination. We know HPV vaccine helps prevent oral cavity infection by HPV types contained in the vaccine. Studies proved that the vaccine protects against cervical, vaginal, vulvar, penile, and anal cancer. Since April 2022, Health Canada approves HPV vaccination to prevent against oropharyngeal and other head and neck cancers caused by HPV. In Quebec, we have a vaccination program in the 4th year of primary school against certain strains of HPV that can induce cancer. In order for the vaccine to be fully efficient, it must be administered before the first sexual intercourse. The HPV vaccine is freely available for children in the 4th grade of primary school, immunosuppressed people and men who have sex with men up to the age of 26. The vaccine is recommended for all adults between the age of 18 and 45 years old. Vaccination programs vary from province to province in Canada. The Quebec Immunization Committee considers that HPV vaccine can be administered to people over the age of 45 who desire to reduce their risk of contracting a new HPV infection included in the vaccine.

### Is screening necessary?

In gynecology, HPV screening is established and has demonstrated advantages for early screening of cervical cancer.

So far, the situation is different for oral HPV infection. For the moment, there is no evidence that oropharyngeal screening is effective at identifying cancer. However, research is under way to find methods to screen people at risk of developing HPV-related cancer.